

# THE HOUSE AT LITTLE SARFIELD

**Little Sarfield: 4. November, 1894**

**13:15**

From a distance he was little more than a single white speck amongst the granite, unmoving, unremarkable. The graveyard was so big, and he so small, that he was lost in a sea of cold stone slabs and lush green grass. Here and there, flowers bloomed: daisies pushing up through verdant soil, dandelions raised their heads to the sky, roses entwined with the stones. He ignored them, just as the rest of the graveyard ignored him. They were so small, such a tiny speck of life, that they simply didn't register. As, from a distance, neither did he.

It was only when you moved closer that he became of interest: his eyes so cold and grey, so fixed and unblinking; his face so lined and careworn; his hands gripping his unopened umbrella as if it contained salvation. He was the

only patch of colour against his slate surroundings, and yet even here he did not seem vibrant. The graveyard seemed to drain the colour from his cheeks, the twinkle from his eye. Even the red of his umbrella's handle seemed mute and drab. The hat that sat perched on his head failed to do so at a jaunty angle, and lips that so wanted to break into an infectious grin resolutely refused. Nothing would break his mood, his concentration.

Somewhere, crows laughed harshly. He paid them no heed.

The object of his attentions lay prostrate at his feet, covered in weeds and long grass. She was beautiful, although it wasn't that which drew him to her. Her skin was pale and dry, but without blemish, covered in the softest chiffon, billowing gently in a non-existent wind. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders in flowing curls, softly merging with the white feathers of her wings. Her wings – the great wings of an eagle – were at rest behind her back, but looked for all the world as if the very next second they would stretch out and carry her back to the heavens.

But this stone angel was flying nowhere today. Time had not been kind to her as she stood guard over the gravestones, and the ground had shifted beneath her feet, sending her crashing to the earth. She had barely survived the fall, beautifully inert, proud in the face of her suffering.

And he looked down on her, his face equally inert, equally proud, and thought thoughts that were entirely his own.

'Subsidence,' she said, suddenly beside him.

He didn't look. He knew what he would see. A young girl, so nearly a woman, dressed black as night and quite possibly with a disapproving look in her hazel eyes. He didn't need that. Not now. He could disapprove quite

enough for the two of them. He'd had years of practice.

'And since the grave was put in,' she said again. 'Either that or they'd been at the communion wine when they put that statue up.'

Silence. Still silence.

'Professor?'

He turned his cold grey gaze on her then. For just a moment, she felt the weight of the centuries press down on her. Thousands of choices made, and regretted? The cold eyes failed to transmit that much. But he looked at her, and he didn't see what he feared. There was only worry, and love, and trust.

As she watched, a spark fired deep in his grey eyes. He smiled gently, and tapped a playful finger across her nose. She grinned back. The Doctor was definitely in.

'Penny for them?' she asked softly.

He looked back to the angel, his eyes meeting hers for a moment. She stared impassively through him, indignant.

'There's a grave under there,' he said quietly, his Scots burr softening the sound. 'One hundred years old, and no-one left to cut the grass.'

Ace looked at him, squinting against the midday sun. With a steel-tipped toe she pushed the heaviest of the weeds aside, to reveal a flat granite slab face up on the ground. Stubborn thistles still obscured the top half, but the weatherworn writing on the bottom could still just be made out: *And also*, it said, *Ruth Ann, Great-granddaughter*. And below that: *born asleep*.

'Poor kid,' Ace breathed.

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor, darkly.

Ace pushed aside some more of the weeds with her hands, kneeling down to study the gritty stone from underneath a frown. Something struck her, and she said:

‘There’s no date.’

‘No.’

‘Isn’t that unusual?’

The Doctor looked again. The angel stared back, blankly, as if daring him to question her.

‘I suppose so,’ he answered.

Ace turned away from her search to look up at the Doctor. Despite his short stature, he seemed to tower over her. So solid, so unmoving, so *sure*: there were times when it seemed to Ace that he was the statue, looking down on her with stone cold, unblinking eyes. Perhaps if she grabbed him, held him, and stared deep into those eyes, she might see something that would tell her, something . . . just *something*.

‘What?’ she asked instead.

‘I was just thinking,’ he said softly. Ace remained quiet, hoping he would say more. ‘There are no children on Gallifrey. No real ones. Time Lords are born sterile.’

Ace kept looking up at him, but the words “*born asleep*” tripped quietly through her mind.

‘That’s terrible,’ she said, firmly.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said. Or, at least, that was what Ace heard him say.

Ace pulled herself to her feet and brushed the clinging greenery from her black clad legs. Brushing her skirt back into place, she looked at the Doctor. He didn't seem like he was ready to move, and wouldn't be for at least another century. She folded her arms across her chest and looked at him like a disappointed mother.

'They're waiting for us,' she said. 'Are you coming? The ceremony's already started.'

'We don't have to go,' he said, avoiding her eyes. 'We could just slip away. I know a planet where the skies are pink and the seas orange. Or is it the other way around? We could go and check.. We could –'

'Come on,' Ace said, 'or we'll miss it.'

The Doctor stopped, seeming to deflate.

'I'll be there soon,' he said.

'Professor –'

'I've just never been good at this sort of thing. Go on.'

With a last look, Ace shrugged her hands into her pockets and wandered away the way she had come, weaving through the myriad of stones. The Doctor didn't watch her go. He didn't need to: he'd seen it before, he'd see it again. He knew it wouldn't start yet, not without him: the guest of honour. His eyes fell instead on the gravestone, quietly resting in its shroud of greenery. With the tip of his umbrella he pushed aside the last of the weeds, to reveal the inscription: *Susan*. And below that: *Beloved Granddaughter*.

With a last unreadable glance, he turned away, to follow Ace towards the remembrance ceremony.

ONE

*“He who abandons the nest,  
Must expect the cuckoo.”*

Martian Proverb.

**Newcastle-upon-Tyne: 5. March, 2000**

**07:25**

Chile was just splashing cold water over his face – trying to wash away the dust of another day on the road –when the telephone rang. He regarded it with cold brown eyes, treating it to the distaste he saved for all things technological. He didn’t trust them, these new inventions, these *machines* that were meant to make his life easier, but only seemed to add increasingly new and varied complications to it. The last machine he’d held in his hand had been a flintlock, and that had been nearly four hundred years ago. Since then, he’d walked a different path, away from these inventions, these tools designed



to stop people talking to people, to stop them seeing the world outside, the true nature of creation.

He glared into the mirror, fixing his reflection with a look of utter contempt. The coffee skinned, rat faced traveller glared back, trying to convince him to ignore the buzzing little creature. But that was the problem: the machines were too insistent, their calls pitched like a baby's cry, irritating all who heard it into doing all they could to silence it. Half-toying with a thousand different ways of silencing it, Chile reached out with a slender hand and whipped the receiver from its cradle.

'Mr Walker?' the child from hotel reception, barely old enough to grow stubble.

'This is Walker,' he growled into the telephone.

'A didn't wake y', did a, Mr Walker? Only y' friend said it was urgent, like.'

'My friend?'

'Y've got a letter, Mr Walker. Hand delivered an all.'

This was strange. He had only stopped in the hotel on his way further North, needing rest for the night. He wasn't intending stopping long that morning, just long enough to eat a hearty breakfast and scrape last night's mud from his boots: there was urgent business waiting for him, and a large payment coming his way when it was complete. No-one could guess he was there – he hadn't known he'd be stopping himself until the early hours of that morning, when the rain became too heavy to walk through. He had told no-one what he was doing or where he was going – he had no-one to tell – but somehow someone had found him.

His first instinct was to slam the telephone down, turn and run. He was cautious by nature – not from fear for his life, more from a desire to keep his secrets his own – and his instincts had long been honed to avoid unnecessary complications. And yet, his curiosity had been roused, demanded sating.

‘Bring it to me,’ he said, knowing he would regret it later.

‘Right y’are, Mr Walker,’ the youth said, obviously more than a little curious himself.

‘One more thing,’ Chile added, softly.

‘Aye, Mr Walker?’

‘Never use the telephone to speak to me again,’ he growled, and crashed the receiver back into its cradle before he had to listen to the receptionist’s confused acknowledgement.

He dressed quickly, throwing on his battered black trousers, crumpled brown shirt, dusty grey jacket in less time than it took the receptionist to use the lift. He felt a pang of guilt as he pulled on his high-backed walking boots, knowing that he should take the time to clean them, knowing that he couldn’t spare the time. It was a shame: the one thing he had the hardest time finding was decent walking boots. It always seemed that just as they felt their most comfortable, that was the moment they would get too old for use. Like Chile himself. No matter, he would clean them at his next stop, in a couple of days.

He picked up his knapsack, threw it over his shoulder, scanning the room quickly to see if he had left anything. Of course, he hadn’t. Everything he owned was in his bag, and he hadn’t taken it out last night, simply fell onto the bed and slept. He strode across the small room and flung the window open: better to be prepared, just in case. If the letter proved to be dangerous, it

could be slung into the morning without too much trouble. Let the early risers below deal with the problem.

As he stood there, looking down on the Tyne Bridge, stretching across the dirty scar of the river, there came a knock at the door.

‘Enter,’ he said, moving away from the window.

The door swung open, and there stood the receptionist: red haired and broad shouldered, a child who could barely be over thirty. In his hands was a plain white envelope, large enough to contain anything.

‘A brought y’ letter, Mr Walker, like y’ said,’ he beamed, obviously hoping for another tip. Walker was only to disappoint him.

‘Show me,’ he said, not moving to take it.

A confused look on his face, the receptionist held the letter up for inspection. The envelope was thick, but plain, his name printed dead centre in a neat hand that he didn’t recognise. Then the receptionist twisted it, showing him the reverse, and Chile knew he should have ignored it. The envelope was sealed with a glob of wax, a seal pressed into it while it was drying. He recognised the design, the twisting knot that signified the Housekeeper of the House of Lungbarrow. He had seen it too often before.

‘Open it,’ he instructed, already knowing what he would find.

The receptionist did, looking inside incredulously.

‘There’s no letter, Mr Walker,’ Chile merely nodding. ‘There’s just these little bits o’ plastic. A don’t get –’

Chile strode back across the room, took the six squares from him. They were cool and white against his dark skin, and brought back old memories. As

soon as they were in his hand, they started glowing with a faint luminescence, pulsing to some unknown rhythm of their own. Walker caught the receptionists eyebrows raise, and held back a grin as he thought what he would make of what was coming. There was something quite amusing about the look people got in their eyes when they suddenly realised the world was a bigger place than their little lives, that it held countless wonders they were too blind to see.

The six squares began to shift and move of their own accord in Chile's hand, and the receptionist's jaw dropped.

'How're y' doin' that?'

But Chile's mind was elsewhere, the pieces in his hand joined to form a perfect cube, the thoughts inside leaking into his head. As he the receptionist watched, a thick frown started to form on Walker's head, his eyes falling back into his head. He was just considering bolting, forgetting his tip – his job, even – and just getting home, never thinking about it again, when Chile's eyes flicked back open. The frown, however, remained.

'I need a pen and a piece of paper,' he growled.

'On the desk, Mr Walker. Complementary, like.'

'Stay there. I have a letter I need you to deliver.'

'Is everything alright, Mr Walker?' he asked, stuttering.

Chile fixed him with a grim stare, said:

'Yes. I have to go back to Little Sarfield.'

The receptionist had never heard of the place, but something in the way Walker said it made him think that was no bad thing. No matter how often he looked back on that strange morning, not once did he wish he had gone

with the mysterious guest. There were some things it was safer not to see.

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**01:46**

In the darkness, Rosemary slept, troubled by dreams she'd only half remember in the morning.

Trees raced by, faster than he could count, raced behind him before he'd even registered their presence, not even sure how he managed to dodge them all, with one eye constantly on the dark behind him. Not that he would let the trees slow him, any more than he did the shrubs and brambles that constantly whipped at him as he ran, or the bitter wind that tore straight through his pyjamas to stretch gooseflesh tight across his body. He felt stupid for not bringing a coat, putting something more warm on, but who else would have? It gave him no time to think, no time to wonder whether it was real, or just some wild dream. It had just been there, luring him. Out to the creature.

Something large, fast, crashed through the trees behind him, never losing his trail for even a second.

He found himself wishing it was a dream. He'd had it over and over again when he was younger: worried about starting school his mum said. Waking up in bed, finding himself in the woods, being chased in his pyjamas. Only he knew this wasn't a dream. He wouldn't be waking up with a jolt, his

mum in the doorway telling him it was alright, to go back to sleep. The cuts on his face, his legs, stung too much for that, his lungs burnt too much, his heart pounding like a drum. He wouldn't be telling the other kids at school about this one tomorrow. He wouldn't be telling anyone, if he didn't run faster, be better.

Somewhere behind him, he could hear trees bending out of its way, the very night opening up to let it pass. This was the creature that the dark was afraid of.

Bare feet pounding against bracken, dead leaves, sharp stones. Nearly dry mud, nearly dead leaves, terrified insects, crushed between his toes, working up his feet. Tattered pyjamas blowing in the breeze, whipping around his body like flails. Hair in his eyes, tears on his cheeks, teeth biting through his lip, wanting to scream out, wanting to beg for mercy, needing his father to make it go away. The hiss of the leaves was in his ears, louder than his heart, louder than the terror behind him. He knew he wasn't going to lose it, knew that he would die.

Behind him, the creature sniffed the air, tasted his blood, and it let out a long baying howl. There wasn't a man, woman or child in the village that slept easy, when that cry echoed through the woods. Everyone felt cold in the beds, felt the thrill of fear deep in their dreams, fought against the bedclothes, clawing at the air. But only Tommy Wiggett had to run from the beast, had to run for his life, only him. That night.

And in her bed, Rosemary twisted, pawing the sheets with weak hands, her dreams dark, deep, cold. If you asked her in the morning, she'd tell you

she didn't dream, didn't remember them. But she'd be looking through you when she said it, looking into a blood black night.

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**15:15**

She was the only person in the library who could consider herself to be in the middle years of life. Everybody around her was either under twenty (swotting for some upcoming GCSE, or reading avidly about the hungry caterpillar while mummy did the shopping) or over sixty (working their way through the latest Mills and Boon, taking the only opportunity they'd get for a quiet natter). She didn't talk to anybody, barely even glanced up from the newspapers in front of her. When she did, it was either to swig tea from a lurid tartan thermos, or to scribble a brief note on the pad in front of her. The pad was already bursting with notes, neat earnest writing, both sides of the page, slotted in any which way they could. In her bag, she had another four notebooks, all the same, all full.

So engrossed was she, she barely even noticed the Librarian stood behind her, her arms piled high with more papers, a few dusty history books, not even when she coughed politely. Not until she tried to read over her shoulder, see just what was hidden inside the tiny loops and spirals, did she turn round and offer her an ever so warm smile.

'You got my papers,' she said, still beaming widely. Any more of this, and her jaw would be black and blue in the morning.

The Librarian smiled right back, her eyes grey and empty. They matched her cardigan, shade for shade.

‘And those books on local history you’d asked me about yesterday, Miss Wakeling,’ she said, voice husky from lack of use.

She held the Librarian up with a single hand, resisting the temptation to wink.

‘Please, Miss Farquharson, call me Tori.’

The Librarian giggled like a twelve year old, put a hand to her thin chest.

‘Then you must call me Judith, Tori.’

‘If you insist, Judith,’ Tori smiled, again.

‘And do let me know if there’s anything else I can get you. Tea, coffee . . .?’

Tori patted her thermos, said:

‘I’m fine, really, Judith.’

The Librarian started edging away, desperately aware that she wasn’t particularly needed nor wanted, but still hoping she could make that last favourable impression on her guest. After all, it wasn’t often she got a real life writer into her library, was it? They were both grinning like love struck teenagers as Judith said to Tori:

‘Well, I’m only just over here.’

‘Thank you, really,’ said Tori, judging the Librarian a safe distance enough away to turn back to her notes. Her smile flicked off instantly, but Judith never saw.



'Any time, any time,' she mumbled heading back to her desk, and a queue of acned youths wanting to take out more than their fair share. A Librarian's work was never done.

Tori, however, dove straight back into her work, devouring every page of both the locals and the nationals the library kept in their archive. Searching for even just one word that might be relevant. Of course, she'd fibbed ever so slightly to the Librarian. When she'd first come in and asked to see the paper archive, the old dear had immediately clamed up: a fatal combination of an outsider's accent (and a London accent, no less) and questions about the Child Catcher, as the papers had dubbed him, had nearly done for her enquiries. She smelt journalist, no doubt. It was only when she'd casually mentioned she was writing a history book about the area for Methuen that blessed Judith had become oh so helpful. Helpful to the point of sycophancy, to the point where every returned smile was making her face ache, her lips threaten to split. Still, it had got her more help than the truth would have.

Actually, I'm here to kill the owner of the House up on the hill there, Judith, and if you could get me a fresh coffee that would be great. Thanks so much (broad grin).

No, she didn't think that particular piece of information would go down too well, and so the book had been born. And it was almost a pity that she wasn't writing it: the only thing the library seemed to have were two dusty tomes – one from 1750 and one from 1875. That left a bit of a gap in her researches, she had to admit. She'd have to try and butter up Judith, see if she couldn't recommend some more useful texts, even the local old battleaxe story teller to go and bend the ear of. Places like this, they always had history,

and people willing to tell it for the price of a pint or two.

Reaching carefully into her bag for a fresh notebook, taking great care not to reveal the revolver hidden carefully under a ring binder, Tori started a fresh page with a new heading: The House at Little Sarfield. Underlining it carefully, she started reading the first book, and scribbling wild notes with her free hand. She was so engrossed, she didn't even manage to smile when Judith happened to toss an ever-ready-to-help chuckle her way.

It was all Murphy could do to stop the poor woman dissolving into tears there and then in the station. It didn't help matters much that the "station" was little more than a shack out by the railway line, and that in precisely seventeen minutes – if Virgin could still be counted on – the next train to Derby would be rattling the windows out of their frames. Despite the fact that he'd weathered his first year in the village without any major disasters, despite the fact he was Sarfield born and bred, the villagers still mistrusted him, still thought he was something of a clockwork orange left on their doorstep overnight. Having the shabbiest office in the history of policing didn't help. Nor did his continued lack of success with "The Child Catcher".

'Please,' Murphy said softly. 'I know this is difficult, but if you could just tell me exactly what happened.'

'What happened?' the woman, Mary Wiggett, fixed him with two red ringed eyes, teeth set to try and lock in the sobs. 'He took my Thomas. Little Thomas.'

And there was no prize for guessing who. Whenever the village's

assembled mothers talked about *him*, they meant the Catcher. And *he* was all the mothers were talking about, this last year.

‘Okay, Mary, that’s okay,’ he reached out a hand, rested it on her shoulder. She shrugged it off, glaring at him.

‘Tell me you’re going to tell the police this time, Sergeant,’ she practically spat his rank out: he could see it sitting on his desk, disgusting little “Sergeant” that it was.

‘I am the police, Mrs Wiggett,’ he said, already hearing the conversation in his head. I meant . . .

‘I meant the *real* police, in the city,’ Wiggett snapped, teeth gnashing against teeth. ‘I hope you’ll tell them, so they’ll send us someone to put a stop to him.’

‘I’m here to put a stop to him, Mrs Wiggett. My commanding officer at Greater Sarfield is kept constantly aware of the situation in the village, and he has the greatest confidence in me,’ or so he says, rather than spend the overtime budget on the hicks in the village, thought Murphy, but kept admirably quiet.

A quiet little retirement patch, it had been sold to him as. Your home turf, easy street. The Chief Super had called him into his office – what? Nearly two years ago now – and told him that Nathan Preston was retiring. Little Sarfield was his patch wasn’t it? Your neck of the woods isn’t it, Murphy? And he’d agreed readily, his heart already rising, already guessing what he was about to be offered. Nice quiet little patch to work out until you get the golden handshake. Nothing too stressful, familiar faces, who could refuse that, eh Murphy? Not him, that was for sure. Although sometimes . . .

‘Two years you’ve had to catch him, Sergeant,’ another spit, ‘Two years and now he’s got my little Tommy.’

Sergeant Murphy bristled slightly, and couldn’t keep the edge out of his voice when he said:

‘Eighteen months, Mrs Wiggett. The Catcher’s been working the village these last eighteen months. I can give you the figure in days, if you’d prefer, or perhaps in sleepless nights I’ve spent trying to figure out a way to catch this bastard.’

Of course he immediately regretted it. Any good feeling he got from lashing out, it was always paid back in spades when he saw their faces – the faces of people he’d lived and grown up with – crumple and fold, turning grey like ash, blowing away in the wind. Because no matter how angry they got, they weren’t angry with him, but the little thief who stole their video, or the joy rider who wrapped a Ford round their herbaceous border. Or the Catcher. Yes, they were all angry with the Catcher. There’d be a lot of folks sleeping easier in their beds when he was caught, Murphy himself just the least of them.

‘I’m sorry, Mary, really,’ he spread his hands to her, a reconciliation. ‘Why don’t you try and tell me exactly what happened, and I’ll head out and see if anybody’s seen him.’

And Mary Wiggett nodded, all the fight gone out of her. She was just as old and tired as the rest of us, thought Murphy. Old and tired and scared. Wondering who’ll be next.

‘There’s still a chance he might be hiding out somewhere, paying you back for not letting him watch – what was it? Red Dwarf, that was his

favourite, wasn't it?'

Wiggett nodded, a slight smile on her face. But they both knew they were kidding each other. It had happened too often, these last eighteen months, always the same story. Vanished without any sign of a struggle, no body ever found. It was a hell of a thing to watch his village slowly whittled away like this, the children of children his Peter had gone to school with. The only thing that stopped him throwing it all in, taking the watch early, was the fact that he couldn't bare to let anybody else mess this up. The Catcher had to be caught, and soon, and if he was the only man willing to put in that extra ten percent to do it, then so be it. Whatever it took.

'Okay, Mary,' he said, pencil at the ready, 'from the beginning.'

As the Doctor strode purposefully down the lane, his umbrella marking time on the gravel road, Ace took the opportunity to watch him, closely. Not with her eyes, of course – it tended to make the Doctor nervous when she spent hours staring at her – but with Wolsey's, who was rolling down the hill behind them, occasionally getting distracted by mice or birds that strayed foolishly into his field of view.

It was strange, but Ace just couldn't get enough of looking at him, this new him, this old him, all flashing eyes and grins and dapper new wardrobe. He looked so . . . so much like he used to, she supposed. Before the Cheetahs. There wasn't the wall in his eyes any more, that shield that he'd hidden his anxieties behind, before. All there was now were the usual old secrets, those that he'd carried with him from the cradle, and would take with

him to the grave. It felt good to have him back, after the last year, with no-one but Wolsey and her ghosts.

She'd nearly died when he turned up on the beach, a thousand different thoughts flashing through her mind in one. Was this an earlier Doctor, Mel's Doctor, bumped into her by accident? Or some double, wandering round pretending like that film her Mum liked so much. Or had she cracked? Had it all got too much for her: she'd travelled to find herself, but instead had she lost herself entirely? Wolsey didn't trust him either – he was disturbed by the change in his scent. It took Ace quite some time to realise that it was because he didn't have the tang of a Cheetah clinging to him, the same smell she got so used to coming from her that she barely even noticed it. Wolsey had never scented the Doctor before, of course, and Ace hadn't paid it much attention either. Then all that stuff with the Potatoheads had kicked off, and there couldn't be any doubt. This was him, her Doctor, back again. From the dead.

And as Wolsey watched from behind them, the Doctor, her Doctor, waved at the Kitling behind their backs.

'You don't have to keep an eye on me, Ace,' he said, eyes down on the valley. 'I'm not going anywhere. Not this time.'

And she grinned, feeling part guilty, part relieved. Yeah, this was her Doctor: he could read her like a book.

He stopped suddenly, throwing his arms out wide and taking in the whole hillside.

'There,' he said, that glint in his eyes.

Ace looked, and saw the House looming up in front of them, the trees huddling round it, trying to hide it.

‘What’re we doing back here? You’re not planning another Bolognese, are you? I’m still working off the last one.’

‘Not this time, Ace,’ he said, and she could practically see the plan forming in his mind. Plan for what, she had no idea, but she didn’t doubt she’d find out soon enough. When all Hell started to break loose.

‘What, then?’

‘Unfinished business, Ace,’ the Doctor said, his eyes darkening. ‘Unfinished business. Come on.’

And he set off again, leaving Ace and Wolsey to catch him up.

For a second or two, Ace didn’t move. She stood perfectly still, looking up at the House through two pairs of eyes, seeing it in her head how it had been the first time. All the windows dark, the ivy refusing to grow up its walls, the grass leaving a dirt moat all round it, making it look for all the world like the house was growing up from the ground. It looked like an old manor house, built with fortification in mind, a watch tower joining the chimneys on the roof. But it was far older than it seemed, Ace knew. She’d been inside it, felt the centuries coming from it in waves.

As she ran to catch up with the Doctor, already half way to the front door, her head was filled with pictures of that night. Chasing round the garden with a Samurai sword, running after some alien things that had turned a kitty cat into a monster. Business as usual. At least, for her and the Doctor. The couple of police that had been sent up from the city hadn’t known how to deal with it. Nor had the House’s caretakers, for that matter.

As Ace hurried on passed the empty caretaker’s cottage, she wondered how they were getting on. She remembered the Doctor telling her

they'd quit, put the gran into a home and moved on elsewhere. Not that she blamed them. Ace knew all too well what it was like trying to come to terms with finding your body suddenly alien, suddenly capable of things that amaze you, scare you. She couldn't blame them at all.

'Come on, Ace,' the Doctor called, stood at the door, searching his new tweed jacket's pockets for the front door key. 'We've got work to do.'

Yeah, business as usual.

As she reached his side, the Doctor pulled the key triumphantly from his pocket, broad grin cracking his face. It was a huge iron monster, iron teeth crooked and gaping: Ace wondered how he carried it around without it weighing down his coat, but then the amount of stuff he seemed able to cart around in there, would he notice if she dropped a dumbbell in there? He was just about to push the key into the lock when something strange happened. The door swung open.

'Yes?' said the woman in the doorway, and Ace's heart leapt into her throat.

She looked harmless enough – old and thin, but looking like she could still do her fair share of grunt work. Her hair was a cold steel grey, tied back into a bun on the back of her head, her eyes clear and blue. She was dressed neat and starched, but Ace somehow got the impression it made her uncomfortable. She smiled sweetly at the Doctor and Ace, and the young woman noticed she was missing a couple of teeth.

The Doctor recovered first – as always – his grin faltering for a second, then turning full on, teeth practically blinding. She noticed that he managed to palm the key with one swift motion, the stranger never even noticing it. He still



had it.

‘How do you do?’ he said, doffing his hat, taking the opportunity to slip the front door key inside his Panama hat. ‘I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend, Ace.’

‘You’ll be wanting rooms, I guess?’ she said, stepping out of the doorway, letting them look inside.

Everything was scrupulously clean, as always, but things had changed since the last time Ace had been there. The stairway had been re-carpeted, a rich crimson velvet, and the door to the armoury was locked with a large padlock. But the most obvious change was the reception desk inserted just next to the stairs, a row of pigeon holes and room keys nailed up behind them. Ace saw a flicker of distaste flash across the Doctor’s face, and then vanish. Ever the professional.

‘Rooms?’ he asked, innocently.

‘Rooms. You are looking for the guest house, aren’t you?’ she asked, an eyebrow arching slowly.

The Doctor and Ace exchanged glances.

‘The guest house,’ the Doctor echoed.

Ace got the impression things weren’t going exactly to plan.

TWO

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**16:01**

‘This one’ll be yours, me duck,’ the old woman said, pointing to the guest bedroom. Ace knew it was the guest bedroom: she’d stayed there before. Without having to pay for the privilege.

Not that the old dear was anything but likeable: she had an air of casual disrespect that Ace couldn’t help but admire. Whether it was the little shrug of resignation she’d given when – on being told “No pets, love” – Wolsey had simply turned tail and head for the caretaker’s cottage, or the way she’d immediately asked the Doctor whether they’d be needing two singles or a double, with a look of such innocence on her face that she just *had* to be asking out of good old fashioned curiosity. Not the normal disapproving snootiness she’d come to expect from her ilk: one thing Ace had seen over

the past year was the inside of a multitude of guest rooms, each with their own specific brand of keeper. And she hadn't done the raised eyebrows who're-you-trying-to-kid-mister when the Doctor had asked for two singles – an occupational hazard of being her age and travelling with somebody the Doctor's age (or even the age the Doctor currently looked like he was) was that no-one would believe you were just friends. Telling them she was his niece didn't seem to help, either. Not that the Doctor ever noticed. Ace was convinced that he was just like an Action Man when it came to that kind of thing: get his clothes off him, and you'd just find a pair of blue underpants welded to his crotch.

The old woman – Rosemary, she'd introduced herself as the Doctor and Ace scraped their jaws off the front step – had taken them through to the little reception desk erected by the stairs and asked them both to sign in, while the Doctor glanced around for all the world as if seeing the place for the first time. He'd really missed his calling: the universe's gain was the RSC's loss. Or vice versa, depending on your point of view. He'd cooed appreciatively to Ace about the wood-panelling, the carpets, even going so far as to point through to the dining room and its huge mahogany table.

'This is a beautiful place you've got here, Miss . . . ?' the Doctor had said, letting the sentence hang in the air.

'Just Rosemary,' the old woman had answered, either not rising to the bait, or not even seeing the worm.

'But this desk. Obviously not part of the original fittings, wouldn't you say, Ace?'

'Definitely,' she'd said, playing her part beautifully.

‘Wherever did you get it?’

Rosemary hadn’t even batted an eyelid. She just rested a palm on the smooth Formica top as if she was just as proud as the Doctor of the hideous thing, and said:

‘Got it from IKEA,’ there was a glint in her eye, a grin spreading over her face. ‘Walked right in and paid for it myself, in cash. Sign here, and here.’

The Doctor’s pen had danced briefly, leaving his spider’s-crawl signature in the big red book. He didn’t even pause to see what his hand was doing, just carried on regardless with his fishing trip.

‘Well, it’s definitely a desk to be proud of, Rosemary,’ he relished the Rs in her name ever so slightly, unable to stop himself no doubt. ‘Solid top, sturdy construction –’

He floundered slightly, his hand waving vaguely in the air. Ace leapt in to his rescue.

‘Nice colour.’

‘Nice colour, yes,’ the Doctor agreed, back on a roll. ‘And still looking fresh from the factory.’

And then she bit, and all the Doctor had to do was reel her in.

‘Well, me duck, there’s no shock in that, is there? It’s only been there six months.’

‘Six months?’ the Doctor echoed. Ace could see the calculator in his head spring into action. From the look on his face, she could tell he’d got the same answer as her.

‘We’re new, but we’re gonna be around some time, don’t you worry,’

she'd said, pride inflating her thin frame. 'Few years, you won't be able to move for guests round here.'

The Doctor had kept at her as she'd led them up the staircase to their rooms, every little comment designed to draw out some seemingly innocent response from her. No matter what she said – even the crack about her arthritis – Ace knew the Doctor would be taking it in, even when he looked like he was far more engrossed in the flock on the walls, or what the particular shade of the carpet was called. He'd file it all away somewhere in that labyrinthine mind of his, never knowing exactly what might prove significant later on. As far as Ace could tell, most of it was irrelevant, but the Doctor nodded and ah-ed like she was telling him where the source of the Nile could be found.

It was only as they reached the top of the stairs that the Doctor had let the mask slip a little, heading by force of habit for the master bedroom with its four poster bed and walk in wardrobe.

'Nice try, love, but it's no good. That's taken,' Ace could see the Doctor cursing himself for the slip. 'This one'll be yours, me duck.'

And he'd been redirected to the smaller of the two guest room: a simple small bed and a tiny wardrobe, both looked – to Ace's eye – like the product of another trip to IKEA. The Doctor smiled politely, and doffed his hat.

'You've been here before, then,' Rosemary said, handing the Doctor a clean towel and a bar of soap.

'Ah, yes,' said the Doctor sheepishly, the little boy with his hand in the biscuit barrel. 'Am I that transparent?'

'Nah,' she said, grinning back. 'It wasn't for the way you made straight

for the good room, I'd never know. Not an old guest, I know. You a friend of Jacob's?'

'Jacob?' the Doctor asked innocently. Ace hovered in the doorway, watching the master at work.

'The owner. Take that as a no, then.'

'No, I can't say we do. My friend and I are something of amateur historians. We've had an interest in this House for some time now. We looked in some time ago. Before it became a guest house. It had a different owner.'

And Rosemary's face had gone hard, and she'd said sullenly:

'Yeah, well Jacob owns it now. That one there's yours, love. You need anything, I'm right downstairs.'

The Doctor and Ace watched her hobble down the stairs, the Doctor clutching his umbrella to his lips.

'Well?' he asked softly.

'Seems nice enough. Not the mad dictator type.'

'Hmm.'

'But she's still here, when she shouldn't be. And then there's this Jacob guy,' a thought struck Ace. 'You never got the urge to call yourself Jacob, did you? Settle down and run a nice family business?'

The Doctor shook his head, grin gone, eyes dark.

'No, course not. She's not your type anyway, right?' she said, but she might as well be talking to herself. 'I s'pose you got the same date I did, yeah?'

'Hmm?'

‘Oh come on, Doctor. Six months ago. Round about the time you . . . well, all that stuff with Jötunson.’

‘Yes, it doesn’t seem rather coincidental, doesn’t it?’ he said, rapping his umbrella decisively on the floor. ‘Go and settle yourself in, Ace. I’m going downstairs.’

‘What for?’

‘I think I should see if I can’t meet with this Jacob. I think we’ve got a lot to talk about.’

And Ace found herself praying that the sudden chill on the landing was only down to new air conditioning, fresh from IKEA. Otherwise, she thought, this Jacob guy’s in a lot of bother.

Tori worked her way round to the graveyard, picking her way through overgrown bushes and discarded bottle, weaving between the weeds that poked their heads up through the gravel pathway, itself edged with long grass and detritus. Either the people in Sarfield hadn’t got God yet, or they were so busy praying that a little spring cleaning took up just too much time. The graveyard itself loomed up like a broken smile, crooked headstones leaning this way and that on the long green grass. A few of the graves were new and well-kept, but most were crumbling monoliths, slowly decaying back into the ground.

Her eyes on the myriad of graves, Tori failed to watch her feet. Kicking something hard and cold in the grass, the world lurched up around her and



the floor delivered a rough kiss on her cheek.

Perhaps if the villagers cared a little more about their dead, they could actually clean this dump up so people weren't liable to kill themselves. She pulled herself up off the ground, muttering fiercely, looking round to see if anyone had seen her stumble. There was not a soul around, only the terraced houses hunched resolutely outside the grounds, as if resenting giving the church even such little quarter. The lane outside, the pavement, hell the whole damned village in between the library and here, all were empty and quiet. Was it always like this, she wondered, or was it down to the Child Catcher?

Glancing down at what had tripped her, Tori managed to spot a crumbling stone angel prostrate in the grass. Another family neglecting their duty.

'Are you alright, miss?' came a voice from behind her, and Tori nearly jumped out of her skin.

Once her heart returned to its usual position, she turned and saw a round little figure rushing at her from out of the church. Tori got the impression that the little man was made completely from jet black velvet, soft and forgiving, but that they had skimped somewhat in the final reckoning: his shiny bald crown poked out from a ring of neat black hair, a wrinkled island. His face was red by the time he reached her, him gasping and pulling at his dog-collar as if he was about to have a heart attack.

'Are you alright, Father?' Tori said, holding him firmly to stop him tumbling over in the grass. The stuff there was in there, he'd probably come back up with rabies.

The Father smiled, his face not just red from exertion.

‘That’s what I meant to ask from you,’ he panted eventually. ‘I saw your fall from the rectory.’

He waved in the vague direction of the side of the church, and Tori saw a small cottage nestled in next to the larger building, as if for warmth. She felt her own cheeks tingeing red: not enough to graze her hands, but someone had to watch her too.

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ she said, turning to give the statue a polite nudge with her toe. ‘Your lady there tried to send me over.’

‘I am sorry,’ said the blustering little man, pulling himself away from Tori to try and brush the statue away with a few taps of his toe. It remained resolute, immobile. ‘We’ve been having trouble with that recently.’

‘Gardener ran off with the poor box?’

‘No gardener,’ he admitted, shamefaced. ‘No poor box, either. Hardly any congregation, to speak of.’

Tori nodded solemnly, turned away as if to watch the thousand villagers not coming up to the church’s door. With a well-practised movement, her hand was in her bag, flicking the switch on her Dictaphone and out again before the Father even noticed what was going on. She turned back to him, tried to sound casually concerned as she said:

‘The Catcher?’

The Father nodded softly, avoiding Tori’s eyes.

‘It doesn’t help,’ he said, and then when Tori failed to say anything else: ‘But attendance wasn’t exactly high before then, if I’m honest. People don’t need God when they’ve got East Enders.’

He laughed weakly, as if to suggest it was only a joke, but Tori could hear the edge in his voice. A church was a big building to be alone in week after week.

‘Still, there must be a fair few who don’t go anywhere they don’t have to,’ Tori asked lightly, adding: ‘No offence, I mean, Father.’

‘None taken, really. And it’s Andrew, please,’ he extended a hand. Tori took it, sitting like a wet fish in her hand.

‘Tori,’ she said, pausing expectantly.

‘Tori?’ he queried, that look already appearing on his face.

‘Short for Victoria,’ she said. And there it was, that question again. He had the same look she’d seen a thousand times before sat on his face. It wouldn’t be long.

‘What’s wrong with Vicky?’

Arggghhhhh! Every damned time!

‘Everyone always called me Tori,’ she lied, trying not to grit her teeth.

‘Oh,’ he said, as if amazed that even so simple a thing could possibly be true. ‘Well, at least we have you at the church today. Is there anything I can help you with?’

‘I wanted to have a look at your graveyard, if that’s okay?’

He beamed, perhaps at last glad that somebody was taking an interest. Perhaps he was even making plans to get her to mass, maybe even Christmas and Easter sermons too. Or perhaps it was all bluster, and he was just waiting to spring the trap.

‘Certainly. I’m afraid we don’t have much of a plan as such,’ he waved

an arm over the fallen headstones, 'As you can see, most of them are still moving. But you're welcome to look for your relative's stone. It is a relative, is it?'

Time to bite the bullet, push her luck.

'No,' she said. 'I'm looking for the monument.'

Silence, a look of confusion. Reporters, trained assassins, angry watch dogs, all of them failed to emerge from a thousand hiding places in the broken ground. Perhaps they were waiting for her to really dig herself in. Or perhaps, just perhaps, nobody actually knew what she was doing.

'Oh, the Stone!' he said, practically slapping his forehead. 'Sorry, everybody round here just calls it the Stone. Another lapse, I suppose. Follow me, I'll show you.'

He led her through the maze of tumbledown gravestones and rotting flowers, Tori keeping her eyes firmly on the ground, rather than risk landing amongst the filth and rubble. She wondered how the villagers put up with this kind of rot in their own church, why no-one did anything about it. She thought that Father Andrew was going to laugh when she asked him.

'It's the money. We don't get enough money to pay for a groundskeeper. I do what I can but . . . And it's hard to convince people to donate their hard earned when the beneficiary looks like this. Vicious circle.'

'But there must be something . . .'

Andrew held up a hand, a look of resignation on his face.

'It's really not worth getting upset about it. It's just the way it is.'

Sensibly, Tori kept her mouth shut.

‘Well, here it is,’ he said, standing her right in front of the monument.

Tori smiled, recognising the cairn from the book she’d been reading in the library that afternoon. Taller than she was, the monument was made out of a thousand pieces of stone and brick, each placed together with such care and precision that they had stood undamaged these last two hundred odd years. But even here, the decay wasn’t unchecked. There was moss and ivy steadily climbing up the sides of the stones, and the plaque attached to the biggest stone was buckled and almost unreadable, the letters seemingly scratched off by the very hand of time itself. Tori bent in closer, to try and read them.

“‘In remembrance of,’” Andrew began to recite, his eyes closed as he read the words in his memory, “‘our brothers and sisters of the first village of Sarfield, destroyed in 1794.’ I think that’s what it used to say.’

‘It doesn’t say what destroyed it,’ Tori mused, half to herself.

‘No,’ the Father agreed. ‘I’m not entirely sure myself.’

‘You would’ve thought it would’ve gone by now,’ Tori said, then – seeing a look of hurt flash across the Father’s face – added: ‘I mean, what with the state of everything else.’

Then, listening to herself, she realised that probably wasn’t the best thing she could’ve said.

‘Well, to be honest, we keep an eye on the Stone,’ he said, perhaps not even noticing as she tried to extract her size nine from her mouth. ‘It has a benefactor. A guardian angel, I suppose.’

‘Oh really?’

Andrew nodded, a grin splitting his face in two, the sun glinting off his bald pate.

'Oh yes. Organises the remembrance ceremonies every – let's see, twenty years? Pays for everything. Every twenty-five years, yes that's right. Gets quite upset if the Stone doesn't look its best, or so they tell me. So we try and keep it looking its best.'

'What's his interest, this benefactor?'

'I'm sorry?' Father Andrew looked confused: as if there could be any other motive in life but good will to all men. Perhaps this time she could be a little more tactful?

'I mean, why does he want the village remembered, per se? Why not – I don't know – why not the war?'

'Which one?'

'Either. Any. I just wondered what his interest in Sarfield was.'

'Oh,' said Andrew, 'oh. Well, I've never really met him, you understand, but . . . Well, people round here tend to say he had family in Sarfield – ancestors, you understand. His family's been arranging the remembrance ceremony for, well longer than anyone round here can remember is all I can say. And the Smith's have had property here for the last two hundred years at least.'

'Property?' Tori said.

Andrew turned round, motioning with his hand that Tori should follow his gaze. Looking up through the overgrown trees that surrounded the grounds, up past the rows of blank eyed houses, with satellite dishes

reflecting the sun into her eyes, looking up she could see the wall of the valley looming high all around them, hemming them in, trapped. She took her guide from Andrew's finger, following it with her eyes, until she saw it, dark and black against the sky, crouching as if aware it was being spied on, instincts ever sharp.

'Property,' Andrew repeated, solemnly.

And Tori stood, looking up at the house, the guest house where she was staying. The house that had ruined her life. *His* house.

As soon as Ace pushed the door to her room open, she'd seen him, spread out on the bed, looking as relaxed anything. He rolled over as she came in, revealing his belly, fixed her with his cool eyes and let out a quiet breath. Ace simply glowered at him, trying to keep her face set, trying not to grin.

'What d'you think you're doing here?' she snapped.

Wolsey merely rolled on the bed again, flicking his tail up at her. He knew she wasn't as angry as she made out, could feel her true emotions as easily as his own. He even risked clawing the duvet a little, just to test her patience. She merely perched on the corner of the bed and pulled him away from the floral fabric, stroking the fur behind his ears in that way she knew he loved. He purred softly, stretched out his claws into her legs before reclining onto her thighs. She didn't even flinch, feeling as much as he did the need to flash his claws before resting.

‘You’ll get me into trouble,’ she said, absently.

And Wolsey merely relaxed, well aware that they were both equally capable of getting the other into trouble, and both equally capable of fighting their way out again.

As Ace sat on the bed, absently scratching the Kitling’s ears, she let her eyes trail around the room. She didn’t usually stay in this room, usually either taking the master bedroom or just lounging on the sofa downstairs – Christ, she hoped the sofa was still there, it was uncommonly comfy and they’d never find another like it. This was the room that usually contained the Doctor’s computer – in fact, it was still here, jammed into a corner under a cloth. She could make out its bizarre shape under the cotton, see a glint of a valve catching the evening sun. She’d have to get that set back up before the night was out: no doubt there’d be some kind of donkey work for her to do on it.

Aside from the computer, there wasn’t really anything left of the Doctor in the room. The desk had been moved elsewhere, and a small bed and a bedside cabinet shipped in from God alone knew where, jammed in to the already small room. On the wall there was a print of some anonymous countryside, done in faint water colours. The sort of thing that only landlords and her mother seemed to like. Perhaps she’d take it down, as soon as she could shift Wolsey from her lap.

Her eyes fell on the window, out beyond into the grounds, the border of dark trees standing guard, making sure nobody got in, or out? At least the view was familiar. The sky was starting to darken, heavy clouds turning a soft pink hue, streaks of orange dashing across the already purple sky. Out past



the trees, she could make out the basin of the village, a few lights burning in some of the windows. How many times had she seen that village, travelling with the Doctor? Travelling the wonders of the universe, but somehow always ending up right back here. What was his fascination with the Earth? With Little Sarfield?

Not that she didn't feel a little fondness for the village herself, fostered no doubt by countless nights of cocoa and Italian food in the huge kitchen downstairs. That kitchen had always looked like it could cater for more than her and the Doctor, and now it had to. Perhaps it would do the house good, a few more people to shake the dust out of the rafters. But would the Doctor see it that way? No, of course not. He'd see a mystery, an invader, and he'd step in.

Well, he was big enough and ugly enough to look after himself. He'd left her to her own devices, so she wasn't going to sit around trying to solve his mysteries for him. It was time she stretched her legs, shook the dust out of her own rafters.

'Come on, Wolsey,' she said, picking the still purring Kitling up by the scruff of the neck. 'Let's get some fresh air.'

Rosemary piled the plates carefully onto a tray, heaping a pile of cutlery from one of the drawers next to them. Leaving the tray resting on the work surface, she went over to one of the cupboards and took a handful of napkins from inside. Cloth, not paper. Jacob had insisted. She let them sit on top of the knives and forks: the folding could wait until she was in the dining

room. But she would fold them, into neat pyramids, the way Jacob had showed her, and everything would be just so.

With a quick glance again at the tray – checking she had everything – she lifted the tray and pushed through the connecting door to the dining room with her backside. The room was dark – the sun was already dipping behind the trees in the grounds – and she had to make her way to the table mostly by memory alone. Resting the tray on the table, she fumbled in her pocket for a box of matches to light the candles with. She preferred the room in candle-light: it softened all the stark lines, gave the wood panelling a warmer hue. If it were up to her, everything would be light by candles, and the world would be a soft edged place.

A crack, a whiff of sulphur, a flame dipping to the wick. The Doctor smiled at her from where he'd been sitting, in the dark, at the head of the table.

Rosemary felt her heart leap. She hadn't thought anyone was in here, and certainly not lurking around in the dark. Not that she was going to let him see her surprise: she'd seen worse things than this little man in her life. No matter what kinds of games he wanted to play, he wasn't going to win. She just smiled back, and began setting the plates for dinner.

'Sitting in the dark, me duck?' she said, not looking at him, not even making him feel that important.

'I was looking at the gardens,' he said, the candle light gleaming in his grey eyes. 'The begonias will be out in the summer, and the roses. You can't imagine how beautiful the gardens look, when everything starts to bloom.'

'You know a lot about it,' she said, concentrating on the cutlery. Knife,

knife, fork, fork, spoon.

‘Ah, well, I’ve been here before, remember,’ he said, leaning forward in his chair, cradling his hands before him.

Knife, knife, fork, fork, spoon. Little men didn’t come into it.

‘Do you know what happened to the owner of the house?’

‘Jacob’s the owner.’

‘Ah yes, but before him.’

‘He died.’

‘Yes.’

A pause, a silence. Rosemary started to think maybe she’d done something wrong, too free with her lips and not careful enough with her head.

‘You did know, didn’t you?’ she asked, putting aside the plates for the moment.

‘Yes, I knew.’

‘Were . . .’ to ask or not to ask. Too late now, of course. ‘Were you close.’

‘Very,’ said the Doctor, the slightest trace of a smile on his face. ‘Tell me about Jacob.’

Rosemary went back to her plates, her knives, began folding the napkins slowly and deliberately.

‘You’ll meet him yourself soon enough, me duck.’

‘Where is he today?’

‘He’s got a meeting in the village. Business. He’ll be back tonight.’

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ said the Doctor, coldly.

Rosemary put down her knives and forks and fixed the Doctor with a glare. It was her best one, perfected after years of putting up a no-nonsense, don’t even think about doing that front. Just for a moment, her eyes burned brighter than the candle flame between them. She was even going to say something – perhaps “if you mess with Jacob, you’ll have to mess with me,” or just a simple “stay away from him,” – but instead, she dropped her eyes and went back to folding napkins with hands that refused to stay firm. She couldn’t bring herself to hold his gaze for any longer than she had to: it was too much like staring into a mirror, her own cold stare merely a pale reflection of the real thing.

The Doctor leant out and put a hand on Rosemary’s, staying their restless activity. His skin seemed just that bit too cold, a pale imitation of normal.

‘This is an old House,’ he said, gravely. ‘Older than you can imagine. It has a long history, a knack of surviving. People have tried to do it harm more times than I can count, and yet it’s still here. Those that meant it ill . . .’

The Doctor reached out slowly, and deliberately crushed the candle-flame between his thumb and his forefinger. The darkness pounced into the room.

‘Be sure what you’re doing,’ he said from the darkness, ‘be sure what your friend is doing. Be careful.’

And then he was gone, and Rosemary found herself alone with the dark, again.

THREE

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**18:32**

As Tori burst through the front door, she saw Rosemary sitting at reception, staring at the dining room door. She had a look on her face that Tori couldn't quite place: probably indigestion or something.

'Alright, Rosemary?' she said, already halfway up the stairs.

'Hello, Tori,' she heard the call come, eventually. 'You gonna be joining us for dinner, love?'

'Not tonight, Rosy,' she called from the top of the stairs. 'Busy night.'

She was a good old dear, was Rosy, always trying to look out for everyone. She supposed that was why she went into this kind of business: mother all the guests. Tori didn't know what her connection was to the owner,

but she hoped she wasn't too involved. She was beginning to like her.

Not that she'd seen the owner, that dark haired little imp that she still saw in her dreams every night. Him and Tim, locked in some kind of Freudian dance. She'd just met his agents – Rosemary and Jacob, both confusingly likeable. But not enough to cloud her judgement. No. No, she knew just what she had to do: she'd spent too long picking through the remains of the owner's handiwork. The victims of his pet's voracious appetite. Wasted too much time. Well, tonight was the night when she'd find him.

Eyes on the dark sky outside, Tori reached into her bag and pulled out her revolver, caressing it with thoughts of Tim crowding around her. Tonight.

She placed the gun carefully on the four poster bed, the dark barrel reflecting the pale ghost of the crisp white duvet, and she began to prepare herself. Over to the wardrobe to pull out a thick dark jumper, and thick cotton trousers. She'd learnt a lot over the last few weeks, but not least of which was the importance of keeping warm. The first night, she'd returned cold as a icicle, fingers so numb she'd have had difficulty firing a cannon, let alone her revolver. She'd gone right out the following morning to invest in a fleece and the thin thermal gloves that she lifted from her underwear drawer.

Once she was suitably insulated, she lifted the revolver, held it to her eye. She could see dark eyes reflecting in the glossy shell, knew they were hers, imagined they were Tim's. She knew he was right behind her, was waiting for her to put him to rest, finally. The Doctor and his pet didn't stand a chance.

Slipping the revolver into her pocket, she stepped out of the room, careful to lock the door. Bounding down the stairs again, eager to get started,

she heard Rosemary call her back. Tori turned, and saw that the old woman was smiling at her, brandishing a thermos flask and a carefully wrapped packet of sandwiches.

‘I made you these, love,’ she said, ‘keep you warm.’

‘Thanks, Rosemary,’ she said, slipping them both into her bag.

The old woman reached out with a strong hand, brushed Tori’s arm ever so gently.

‘I hope you get him tonight,’ she said softly.

Tori nodded solemnly, and turned and left without another word.

It seemed strange, moving away from the house to hunt down the Doctor – the Catcher, as everyone else knew him – but after spending her first week waiting for him to make an appearance, hearing about another child missing in the night, she realised she was going to have to find him. He was out there somewhere, never coming back to the house but always getting himself a fresh victim. The village wasn’t as large as it seemed, and a simple patrol route could have her covering the most likely places in a night. The places where the children slept, she meant.

As she walked down the gravel path, softly crunching in the dark evening, Tori suddenly realised she could hear someone moving nearby. *Something.*

She immediately hopped off the gravel, taking a few lightning paces across the lawn before rolling to the floor, hand already going for the pistol. She was quite impressed by her quick thinking, her immediate action, and above all her hunter’s cunning: if it was the Doctor’s little pet in front of her,



she felt sure it could have no idea what was about to hit it. Which was why she felt extremely upset when she heard a polite little cough from beside her.

‘You alright?’ said a loud voice above her. Tori couldn’t help but be relieved that it had a half-buried London accent behind it.

Looking up, she saw a young woman, probably not much younger than herself. She was dressed in dark clothes – leggings, a short skirt, a jacket – and, despite the darkness, had a pair of mirrored sunglasses hiding her eyes. She had the kind of long flaxen hair that Tori had always admired – her own scraggly blond tresses always looked too messy once they got below shoulder length – but it was pulled back into a severe pony-tail, ready for action. It was only as Tori relaxed her grip on the pistol in her pocket that she saw the kitten sat at the woman’s feet. It stretched and yawned, unimpressed.

‘I thought you might’ve hurt yourself, the amount of noise you made,’ the woman said, still grinning.

Damn. So much for her cat-like stealth.

‘No, I er,’ she looked around, at the smooth unbroken grass, ‘tripped.’

‘Right,’ said the woman, and held out a hand to pull Tori to her feet. She was a lot stronger than she looked, Tori realised as she suddenly found herself jerked skywards. ‘I’m Ace.’

‘Tori,’ said Tori, brushing the damp grass from her knees.

‘You staying at the house, yeah?’

‘Yeah, you too?’

‘Just moved in,’ Ace glanced back over her shoulder, up at the dark building. ‘It’s a bit spooky, don’t you think.’

'You don't know the half of it,' said Tori, and the young woman raised an eyebrow in question. 'Look, I'd better get off. I'll see you, yeah?'

'Where're you going?'

'Just down to the village,' she said, praying she'd mind her own business.

Ace smiled, a bright and charming smile.

'I could do with a walk,' she said. 'Mind if we come with you?'

And by the time Tori had worked out that "we" meant Ace and her kitten, it was far too late to say no.

The Doctor had a quick glance round, and saw Rosemary heading back to the kitchen, probably to fix dinner for how ever many other guests there were, more likely just because she knew he wouldn't be in there. Either way, it suited him. It gave him time to try and work out what was going on here.

He sat himself down on the stairs, resting his hat and umbrella beside him, rubbing his eyes. He liked the stairs, for some reason. They were always a nice place to sit, try to think. Maybe it was because he could see the House settling down around him, or perhaps it was because nothing could sneak up on him. It was frightening to think how much that had become a consideration of his life these days, rather than . . . well, the cares he'd had the first time he'd sat on those stairs seemed lifetimes away. Seven, to be precise.

He tried to clear his mind, open up a room inside him that he hadn't

used for too long. Nothing. There was nothing there. It was as if he'd suddenly realised he'd lost an arm, and couldn't remember exactly when it had first gone missing.

He looked up to the ceiling, and said out loud:

'What's going on?'

There was no reply. He wasn't even sure if he was expecting one.

'Why are you doing this to me? You know why I had to do what I did.'

His voice was starting to raise. He didn't notice. He didn't care.

'Why? I did this for you. Who else did? Which of the others tried to help? Who else could help you?'

And the Doctor got his reply.

The front door flew open, bringing in a cold breeze and a scattering of leaves. Right in the centre of the cold wind, stood a tall dark haired man, his eyes ablaze. His brow sloped out over his nose, putting his eyes into heavy shadow, like his clothes, too swathed in darkness. A long flapping coat, a bright white shirt, a long dark scarf. In his arms, he carried the battered and abused body of a small boy.

'Rosemary!' he shouted, the Doctor's ears cracking with the volume.

'Rosemary!'

The stranger rushed in, barely taking any notice of the Doctor, and carried the boy over to the reception desk. With one quick swipe, the clutter from the desk was on the floor, and the body was gently lain on the surface. He began a cursory examination of the boy's mortal wounds, whilst addressing apologies towards the Doctor.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't realise we had guests in tonight. As you can see, there's been another –'

The man's voice trailed off as he cast a glance in the Doctor's direction, a grim look of apology on his face. His face went cold as stone as he saw the Doctor, stood on the stairs looking down at him. Ignoring the faces, both of them stared deep into the other's eyes. Both forgot the world around them, seeing an all too familiar pattern deep in the other. The Doctor's mouth opened slightly, as if to say something, something to set their worlds to rest, but he was cut off. Rosemary came bustling into the room.

'What's the . . .' she stopped, eyes on the Doctor, the stranger. 'Oh, you've met. Doctor, this is Jacob. Jacob, this is the Doctor.'

And the two Time Lords just stood, each staring coldly at the other.

## INTERLUDE

**Little Sarfield: 6. September, 1999**

**22:24**

Rosemary huddled in the kitchen, by the huge stove, and wrapped her blankets around herself. She supposed it was stupid not to take one of the bedrooms – the enormous master bedroom, for example, with its massive four poster bed – but she just couldn't bring herself to sleep in somebody else's bed. Besides, after all the years she'd spent sleeping rough, she doubted she could get comfortable in a nice soft bed any more. She'd toss and turn until she found a nice concrete floor to sleep on, yesterday's newspaper to pull over herself.

She was a woman of simple tastes – life refused to give her anything else – but that wasn't to say she didn't appreciate the heat from the stove behind her now that the nights were cold. She'd slept by that stove every night

for over a year, never once seeing anyone else in the house, not so much as a dormouse. But every night, when it came time to sleep, the stove was on and warm and stayed that way until it was time to wake in the morning.

Perhaps it was used in the day, when she went down to the village to look for food, or perhaps it wasn't. She didn't want to look this gift horse too firmly in the mouth, for fear that the whole thing might just evaporate away.

She couldn't even bring herself to take true advantage of her continued good fortune. Any of the others she'd spend her nights with would have been tempted to take a little souvenir with them each morning, exchange it for a bit of cash in the village. They would have at least looked in the cupboards for food, or used the well-stocked bathroom to wash the worst of the grime from themselves. But not Rosemary. She may still eat from the dustbins of the village, still smell like a rubbish tip in summer, still be caked in a thick crust of mud, dust and dirt from the last ten years at least, but at least she hadn't slain this particular golden egg laying goose. Every morning when she left, she left the house exactly as she found it, and that was why – she was sure – that when she came back at nightfall she found the front door open to her and everything just as she'd left it.

She hoped it was an arrangement that would long continue. She liked the house – and for some reason she couldn't put her finger on, she got the feeling that the house liked her. Stupid.

If it wasn't for the nightmares, she'd be the happiest she'd been since . . . well, since the nightmares started. If she was honest, that was why she was still awake now: she didn't have them every night, but they were frequent enough to make her approach sleep with more than a slight fear. She tended

to keep herself awake as long as she could, before sleep finally claimed her. It made her more tired during the day, but at least kept the night terrors at bay for as long as possible.

That was when it happened. Or started to happen.

It came slowly, first nothing more than a slight restlessness on her part, the idea that maybe she could push sleep away for another couple of hours before it pounced. Then she started to feel a tingle all over her body, the hairs on her legs, her arms, then finally her head, all of them started to rise at the charge in the air. She felt young again, her aches and pains vanishing into nothing. She felt a grin spread itself across her face: this was the best she had felt, the greatest experience of . . .

She was so busy feeling the energy infuse her, she didn't notice the light for a few minutes. It crept slowly into the room, until suddenly it was bright as day, and she had to check to make sure no-one had turned the lights on. Nothing. Then, leaping out of her makeshift bed with new energy, she pounded round the kitchen, looking for the source of the light. She soon found it: brilliant white light was blazing in from around the door down to the cellar – the one door in the house that she routinely found locked to her. She put her hand to the handle: the door opened smoothly, with barely any effort from her.

Despite the blinding light, she found she had an overwhelming urge to walk down into the cellar. One foot in front of the other, down the cold dark steps, into the light. Except suddenly there was no light, just the faint echo of it in the confined basement. Just enough for her to make out the tall figure huddled on the stone floor, naked as the day he was born.

He looked up at her, and Rosemary felt herself transfixed by slate grey



eyes.

‘One of us has died,’ he said in a quiet, reedy voice, ‘one of us has been repl—’

He paused, unsure. He looked around the dark cellar, saw only the empty room, the small window to the outside world. The stars were bright and unfamiliar. As Rosemary watched, she could see confusion spread over his face in a wave.

‘Where are the others?’ he asked cautiously.

‘Others?’ said Rosemary, finding her voice in the gloom.

‘Something is wrong here,’ he said, more firmly. ‘Where are the other forty-five?’

‘I don’t know what you . . .’ her voice trailed off. The strange man had leapt to his feet, had taken her face in his hands, gazing deep into her eyes.

‘You’re not one of the Cousins,’ he said, a cold fact. ‘Something is very wrong.’

Rosemary gulped, unable to take her eyes from his, unable to break the touch of that soft, slightly cold skin.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ she said, willing there to be something, anything.

He looked at her again, and smiled the warmest smile she had ever seen in her life, all other smiles merely the bastard offspring of this one, true Smile. She found herself smiling in response, her cheeks pushing against his fingers.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Will you stay here with me?’

‘What?’

‘Just for a while. We need the company.’

And Rosemary knew there was nothing else she would rather do in the whole wide world.

‘What about the owner?’ she said, hating her mouth for even breathing the words.

The Smile again:

‘The owner?’ he said softly. ‘I *am* the owner, I suppose. This is my inheritance.’

And somehow, Rosemary knew that things were going to be better, from now on.

FOUR

*“Given these exceptional circumstances, this council can see no other option open to us but the immediate cessation of all normal activity of the House of Lungbarrow’s Loom, at least until a proper investigation can be launched. Let us hope these small actions prove to be enough . . .”*

from the minutes of a meeting of  
the High Council of Time Lords,  
Gallifrey, some time ago.

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**19:02**

It was already dark. Somewhere inside, it could feel the sun go down. The very second the sun dipped below the valley wall, the urge was there.

Some nights it resisted, knowing deep inside that it was wrong, knowing that there was something wrong with it, something it couldn't control. Sometimes the urge prevailed, and the prowl began. Just the prowl and nothing more, though. It had that much control left to it, still. Unless the dreams started. If the dreams started, then all was lost and there was nothing it could do to control itself.

Once the dreams started, the hunt began.

'If you want to get anywhere with this,' Ace said softly, 'you're going to need to learn to be quiet.'

Tori shifted awkwardly in the darkness behind her – more noise echoing into Ace's ears – and rustled in her pockets. Ace could smell the gun oil from the pistol in her pocket: she didn't mention it, because Tori hadn't mentioned it to her, yet.

'I thought I was being,' the other woman said, sulkily.

Ace turned her attention back to the street, saying nothing. The street lights burnt harsh pools of light onto the road, making the darkness beyond seem all the darker. In the houses that lined the road, more lights burned, the flat brightness of a neon bulb, the strobing flicker of a television set, the occasional flicker of a lighter. The breeze rustled the trees, caught the bushes they were hiding it. She only hoped the noise would drown out the heavy pant of Tori's breathing in her ears. Nothing else in the street moved, not so much as a mouse. At least if there were mice, that would hold Wolsey's interest. Instead, she could feel the Kitling's boredom growing: he knew this was

wrong, just as she did.

‘What makes you so sure its coming here,’ Ace asked, trying not to snap. She was getting cold and impatient herself.

‘There are three families in this street,’ Tori whispered behind her. ‘Four children, none of them touched yet.’

‘And?’

‘I don’t know. Intuition. I don’t know.’

‘This is wrong,’ Ace said flatly. ‘There’s too much light here for a start. No wild animal’s going to come anywhere near here. And no wild animal’s going to sneak into a kid’s bedroom and make off with him without anyone noticing. They just don’t do it.’

‘What makes *you* so sure?’

‘I know animals,’ she said, refusing to say any more.

Tori shifted, moving up beside Ace so that all she could smell was the woman’s excitement, the anger that burned deep inside her. She didn’t need to look at her to know her pupils were wide, her skin electric: she could feel it.

‘And I know the Catcher. I told you, this is what they do.’

‘They?’

‘He goes in, gets the children – I don’t know how, okay, but they go with him. Then he sets his pet on them.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I’ve seen it. The creature. The cat. And I’ve met him. I know what he’s capable of. I’ve told you: they’re coming here. If not tonight, then soon.’

And Ace didn’t argue, didn’t say a word. But in her mind, a small room

opened up, and Wolsey picked himself up and trotted away. She might have to waste her time staking out a no-go area, but the Kitling could at least try the more likely areas. The dark land, the waste grounds: the big church was the first place he should check – the dark graveyard and the practically ruined building would make a perfect playground for a big cat. Not a brightly lit corner of suburbia.

‘Tell me about it,’ Ace said softly, her mind half with Wolsey, half wishing it could be her racing through the dark corners of the village.

‘I don’t like to,’ she said.

‘You don’t trust me.’

‘No, I . . .’

‘I’m here, yeah? I offered to help. I need to know what I’m up against.’

She breathed in, hesitated. Ace didn’t need to look, she was louder than anything in that quiet night, even the TV blaring in the distance, or the badger nosing through the undergrowth. She could practically hear her heart beating in her chest, the fear she felt, the desire she had to be the one to pull that trigger, to end it all. But what she couldn’t hear was why. Tori breathed in again, the noise echoing in Ace’s ears. She gritted her teeth, a tearing of mountains in the silence. Then she sighed, tidal waves crashing across the shore.

‘There was this man,’ she said quietly, as if saying it too loud would make it too real, ‘this guy, Walker. We were giving him a lift. Me and Tim. He was my boyfriend. We were going to London. So was Walker. Tim said we should: I wasn’t too sure, but he said we should, and – well, he knew more about it than me. He always knew more about it than me.’

Ace said nothing, eyes to the light, and eyes to the dark.

'The car broke down. Bloody heap of scrap, but Tim said it was a good little motor and he kept throwing money at it, trying to bring it back from the dead. Well, it was his money. It broke down here, up there. By the house. That bloody house.'

And still Ace said nothing, despite hearing her teeth gnash, the snarl making the hairs on the back of her neck rise up.

'We went in – Walker took us there, it was his idea. Then – things started to get, I don't know. It's loose in my head. I don't remember it all.'

Shock'll do that, Ace thought. If the Doctor's involved, it's always shock. But she said nothing, letting her eyes wander inside herself.

'He was there. Walker knew him, he wanted something from him I think. But he didn't want to give it up, so he set his pet on us. A cat, a big cat. Panther, I think, except they say panthers don't exist. And they shouldn't bloody exist here, not in this place.'

Looking through her sibling's eyes, Ace saw trees slink past, heard foxes charge through the undergrowth, owls fly overhead.

'The thing, this cat, it killed Tim,' said Tori, softly.

And Ace saw the trees part as the Kitling edged forwards, ever aware: the scent of his prey was in his nose, the pounding of his own heart in his ears. But something was wrong.

'He let it kill Tim, made it kill Tim' Tori was saying, and Ace listened, one ear with her, one with Wolsey. 'I don't know what he did with Walker, but I think he was in on it. He bundled me off pretty quick after that, got me back to



London. Somehow – I don't know how – he convinced me not to tell anyone. I mean, how could he do that? Why would I not tell anyone? I . . . I think I went a little ga-ga after that.'

A giggle, Ace too preoccupied to respond. The trees were parting, Wolsey pushing out from behind a gravestone, the church looming at an odd angle above him. Something, something lurking in the shadows.

'Then I found out I wasn't the only one. I checked the papers, this Child Catcher thing. There've been twelve of them so far. Twelve kids, gone, dead. Must be dead. He lures them out of their rooms – it must be him – and then lets his pet have them. They found a couple of bodies you know: only a couple. Mauled. That was the word the papers used. Mauled.'

There! A shadow, flicking across one of the gravestones, the fallen angel. Go! Closer, come on.

'And I knew what I had to do. I could let him get away with it, keep getting away with it. I knew I had to stop him. So I came here.'

In Ace's head, Wolsey crept forward, belly to the grass, teeth bared, adrenaline racing. By the wall of the church, just out of sight of the road, bathed in shadows: something. Closer, closer.

Ace jumped up, sending Tori sprawling onto her back, shocked by the sudden explosion of movement. Her mouth was agape as Ace towered over her, her teeth glinting in the streetlights, her eyes hidden behind her mirrors.

'Come on,' she mumbled, as if she had something in her mouth.

'But they'll come here!' Tori complained, pulling herself to her feet.

'They have to come –'

Ace snarled at her, anger flashing between them like a charge.

‘They’re not coming here. It’s at the church. Come on, quickly.’

And then without another word she bolted off into the night, diving through the bushes behind them rather than take the well lit street. Tori was so surprised, she didn’t even think to ask how she knew, she just turned and followed, blindly. In her pocket, her fingers clutched the pistol, tight.

‘You’re supposed to be dead.’

The Doctor let his hands run across the boy’s body, the tips of his fingers brushing lightly over the dried blood on his wounds. He was young – seven or eight – his hair blond and muddy, hanging over his forehead in streaks. The Doctor had closed the boy’s eyes with two fingers as soon as he had approached the desk, but he couldn’t convince himself the child was merely sleeping. The wounds were too ragged for that, the face too stretched and distorted. He had died afraid, and the hands of some creature, some terror of the night.

Jacob simply stood, staring open mouthed at the Doctor, and said again:

‘You’re *supposed* to be dead. I’m your replacement.’

The Doctor fixed his Cousin with a glare, eyes burning out from shadows.

‘And you shouldn’t be here,’ he said quietly, holding the words back. ‘But something out there killed this boy, and I’m going to find out what. Then

we'll deal with *our* problems.'

Jacob shook his head, sending dark locks flying around him.

'Of course, yes, I'm sorry.'

He hurried around the other side of the desk, standing opposite the Doctor. Both of them looked down at the child before them; one through dark grey eyes, the other through crystal blue. The broken corpse simply lay there, unable to look back.

It was only as he looked up to speak that Jacob noticed Rosemary frozen pale faced where she stood. Her hands were limp at her side, her eyes wide, pupils two dark pools, too dark pools.

'Rosemary,' she didn't move. He tried again, firmer: 'Rosemary!'

She moved then, just a slight turn of the head, her eyes still on the boy.

'Look at me, Rosy,' he said, suddenly afraid.

The Doctor looked up, and fixed Rosemary with an ice cold stare. He spoke softly, but firmly, his words dragging her eyes around to lock with his.

'We'll need to tell the local police, Rosemary,' he said, his voice coming to her through the fog. 'Can you tell me the sergeant's name?'

'Murphy,' she said, her voice cracking. 'Sergeant Murphy. He'll need to know.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor.

'I should ring him,' she said.

'Yes,' said the Doctor.

Rosemary paused for a moment, her eyes wanting to look back at the tiny body on her desk, the desk she'd been so proud of, but the Doctor's eyes

called to her, held her like a moth to a flame. Instead, she shook her head slightly, as if to clear it, and then suddenly spun around. She headed into the darkness that surrounded the kitchen.

‘Rosy?’ said Jacob, but the Doctor put a hand on his arm.

‘Let her go. She’s in shock: it’ll do her good to have something to do.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jacob, trying to catch the Doctor’s eye. ‘I didn’t know what to do.’

The Doctor looked away, said softly:

‘I get too much practice.’

The Doctor turned back to the body, placing a hand on the boy’s cheek: it was stone cold. He’d been dead a while – probably a whole day, if not more. Not less than four hours, definitely. His body was still, as if the night’s frost had invaded the boy’s very bones, frozen them solid, immobile. The bluish tint to his skin made the red wounds all the more visible: a ragged slash across the throat, more cuts down his torso, in parallel groups of four. They made the Doctor think of train lines, a miss-mash of tracks running across the corpse.

Jacob moved to touch the body, his fingers groping for the throat. The Doctor slapped him away with a swift hand.

‘He’s been through enough already,’ the Doctor said to Jacob’s questioning gaze. ‘Leave him for his family.’

‘Won’t you want to investigate?’

‘Why would you think that?’

‘I’ve heard a lot about you.’

‘I’ve seen all I need to see,’ was all the Doctor would say. Then:

‘You’ve had a telephone put in?’

Jacob nodded into the kitchen.

‘We had to, for the guest house.’

‘That’s something else we’ll have to talk about,’ said the Doctor, darkly.

The Doctor looked down at the body again, one last look, thought briefly of Ace. The wounds were obviously the work of some kind of cat – the throat ripped out by razor sharp canines. The claw marks down the body were impossible to disguise, but whatever had killed the boy hadn’t even tried. It had killed its prey, eaten from it, then left it for the vultures. Except there weren’t any vultures here, no Kitlings to mop up the remains of the hunt.

The Doctor thought briefly about what Murphy had said to him, the last time they’d met. This was it, then. It was beginning.

‘The Catcher,’ said Jacob, his blue eyes still on the body, ignoring the Doctor.

‘What?’

‘The Child Catcher – that’s what they call it. It’s from some film or other: something about the way it can lure them out, then . . . then this.’

He’d been wrong – stupid mistake, thinking everyone waited for him before they started the carnage. It wasn’t beginning: it had already begun.

‘How many?’ he asked.

‘He’s the thirteenth,’ Jacob said.

Thirteen. Unlucky for some. Unlucky for Time Lords.

‘But you don’t need to worry,’ Jacob was saying, the Doctor only half listening. ‘I’ve taken steps to put a stop to it. This is my home, our home now.’

We won't have anything destroy it.'

'You've taken steps?'

'I've enlisted an agent,' Jacob said proudly, flashing a perfect white smile. The Doctor almost found himself warming to him. It was like coming face to face with a living mirror.

'Who?' asked the Doctor.

'It's alright. You've used him yourself, a few times.'

And the Doctor felt his hearts sink.

Chile crouched in the darkness, his dusty coat wrapped tight around him, against the cold. His boots were digging deep into the soft soil of the graveyard, his worn hand gripping one of the crumbling stones for extra support. His dark eyes, however, were somewhere else entirely. At one end of the graveyard, partially obscured by the tumbledown gravestones, was a dark shape, wrestling with a small rabbit. The creature was dark and velvet, but unmistakably feline: the Catcher.

So this was the creature that was terrorising the families of the village, that kept them locked in their houses at night, one eye on the kiddies. It didn't look like the killer of twelve he'd been led to expect, just some overgrown kitty-cat out hunting late at night, unaware that it too was being hunted. Not that he cared either way: tired little kitten, or blood tipped fang, he wasn't doing this out of philanthropy. He had been contacted, and hired, and expected to be paid well for his services. Otherwise . . .

His meeting with the Caretaker that afternoon had been interesting for many reasons, not least of which being it was with the wrong one. Instead of the expected, it had been some lank-limbed impostor, all long hair and flashing smile. Chile could tell from the eyes he wasn't the same man, despite the frightening regularity with which he changed his appearance, sometimes even back again. He had to admit, he was quite relieved it was this child-like newcomer instead. There were old debts to be collected with the other, bad blood between them that would need to be shed before things could go on as before. *If* things could go on as before.

But this new Caretaker, he was an entirely different kettle of fish. Still wet behind the ears, blissfully unaware of how this world worked: how he had ever defeated the other and claimed his seat, Chile would never know. He was so naïve, he had called Chile to do his bidding with no idea of the costs involved: he had said that Chile could name his own price once the creature was destroyed. It was a mistake he wouldn't make twice, but Walker intended to take full advantage of it whilst he could. Once this tired creature was banished, he could claim anything from the Caretaker's house to his very life. All for such a small effort.

The cat-thing was still gnawing on its captured dinner of rabbit, rolling onto its back and tossing the half-mauled creature into the air with its feet, maintaining the pretence of the hunt. It would tire soon, seek something else – perhaps the children he was assured it feasted on, perhaps not. It hardly mattered: shifting his weight carefully, so as not to make a sound, he began to edge towards the beast. It was large, easily Chile's size, but it would be no match for him: he could snap its neck with his bare hands, then wait for his

wounds to heal before claiming his prize. Such a simple night's work.

That was when it all started to get out of hand.

The first thing he heard was a hissed "There's someone else here," cut short by a hand smothering the speaker. The cat's head whipped round, as did Chile's, and saw two dark shapes sneaking towards them. The shorter of the two made enough noise to wake the cemetery's occupants, but the taller made no sound whatsoever, her feet seemingly made of cloud and air. As soon as the shorter noise-maker saw Chile's face, her jaw dropped: the now familiar expression of the poor mortals who had found themselves caught in the Walker's workings before. He wondered briefly what he had done to her, before she suddenly screamed and launched herself at him.

Underneath a rain of tears and fists, Chile managed to roll so that he could see the cat-thing snap its head round at them, realising the hunt was on again. He could see the muscles rippling under its velvet pelt as it uncoiled towards them, bright teeth flashing in the street-lights. He could see the blood-lust in its eyes: he'd seen it before a thousand times. He'd survive, of course, but his frenzied attacker was about to become cat food. Her own fault: she'd distracted him, she deserved everything she got.

That was when the second figure dived between them, crouched right in the creature's path. A brave way to die, achieving nothing. He heard her hiss, cat-like herself, saw the moonlight glinting from teeth that seemed somehow too large for her mouth, then saw the third intruder at her feet: a small black ball of fur, all ahiss itself, tiny teeth bared, tail ramrod straight. Faced with these two foes, two rival hunters, the creature paused, then did the impossible. It turned tail and fled, into the night.



'You killed him,' his attacker was crying to him, 'you killed him, you killed him.'

Reaching out with two iron-strong hands, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her straight into the air. He was holding her, feet kicking the air, as he pulled himself to his feet, stared straight into her eyes.

'I've been hunting that creature for the best part of today,' Chile said coldly, the woman still writhing in his grasp. 'You've cost me a day's work, and a day's pay.'

'Put her down,' said the little cat, prowling towards him.

'Have her,' he said, and threw her through the air. The young woman caught her, and set her on her feet with the minimum of effort.

'Are you alright?' the cat-woman asked, but Chile wasn't interested. If he moved fast, he could probably catch the creature again. He could still claim his payment by the end of the night.

'It's him,' the ball of tears cried. 'He made us go there, he made us. He got Tim killed. Stay where you are!'

This last, Chile realised, was directed at him. He turned slowly, casually looking at the blond. The cat-woman was by her side, an arms length away, looking at her companions hands. They were stretched out in front of her, holding a small revolver, aimed straight at his heart. More complications, more time wasted.

'Tori,' said cat-woman. 'Put it down, Tori.'

'It's him, don't you get it? He's Walker, he took us there, he got Tim killed.'

He didn't have time for this, it was time to leave, before his prey vanished into the night. Even if it cost him a bullet in the chest, it shouldn't slow him down any.

'He took you to the Doctor's House?' the cat-woman asked, and suddenly Chile was all ears.

'You know *him*?' Walker asked, eyes on the cat-woman, ignoring the revolver.

'Yeah. What about you, tall dark and gruesome?'

'He has been avoiding me.'

'Yeah, well he's been busy. Righting wrongs, getting killed, that sort of thing.'

Chile couldn't help but laugh at that: clearly she didn't know *him* at all.

'Creature's such as him don't die.'

'Well the Doctor did.'

'Then he'll return. A new face, perhaps, or not even . . . what? Oh, he already has, yes? And you still think he's mortal? What did he tell you? It was a mistake? He got better? Or science, that great god. Yes, you look like the sort for that. What did he tell you, he was an alien travelling the universe in a space ship? And you believed *that*?'

'Shut up.'

'Yeah,' the gun woman joined in, pushing the revolver closer to his face. 'Shut up.'

'I have a boon to perform,' Chile snarled. 'You are keeping me from my work. Leave me to catch that creature.'

'You're not going anywhere!'

'Tori, calm down. You're not going to shoot him.'

'If it wasn't for him, I'd still have Tim.'

The cat-woman sighed, never taking her eyes from the gun-woman, never letting her avoid her eye. Whatever she believed, she was a professional.

'Why don't we take him up to the House. The Doctor'll –'

'He's here?' Chile snapped, surging forwards, finding the gun fast in his face, not even letting it distract him. 'He's at the House?'

The cat-woman eyed him warily.

'Who?'

'Him,' Chile returned flatly.

'Can't you say it? The Doctor? Come on, say it.'

'Did he tell you that was his name? His real name? Or did he tell you it was a name he'd chosen, to hide his true name? Didn't you wonder why he needs to hide it?'

'It's unpronounceable.'

'There are creatures loose in this world, demons of such immense power that to speak their names alone is to court disaster. Even their use-names are theirs, contain a hint of their true selves. How many people have died, how many got too close to that demon who calls himself healer and paid their price? He is a demon, child, and I will not tempt him by using his name in vain.'

'That's not true,' the cat-woman said, but Chile could see it in her eyes.

'If he is here, then I have business with him.'

'What about the creature?' the cat-woman countered. 'What about your boon?'

'This is an old debt, it takes precedence. The creature is yours.'

And with his coat flapping around him like wings, Chile spun and headed out of the graveyard, not running, not pacing, but at his own steady speed. Tori watched him go, blinking away her disbelief: didn't he see the gun? Didn't he care? She took a step forward, edging around Ace, shouting:

'Stay there! I'll shoot. I will.'

But still he kept walking, the dark creature that had led Tim to his death, that had taken away her life, replaced it with pale cardboard shapes and cardboard emotions. He wasn't going to get away with it, not now. Not ever.

The gun let out a loud crack, and the walker spun to the floor.

The silence was deafening.

'Gordon Bennett,' breathed Ace.

And then the spell was broken, and Ace was rushing over to the dark heap on the ground. Tori paced over behind her, the gun heavy in her hand. She'd done it, the first step on the road to vengeance. It felt . . . well, there were two left, then it would start to feel. Ace had reached the body now, a look of shock on her face: probably never seen blood before. Not that Tori had either, but she could at least bring herself to look at it, make sure the job was done.

As she reached the body, its hand shot up and grabbed Ace by the

wrist, pulling itself up to its feet, a dead man walking.

‘Still don’t believe in demons, child?’ Chile snarled, the blood slowly cauterising around the ragged hole in his chest.

Tori felt her world reeling around her. Numbly, she brought the gun up and took aim again.

‘Go ahead,’ Walker snarled at her, ‘fire the gun. Waste another bullet. Slow me down again. Do it. It will be the last thing you do. Ever.’

And then Walker spun, and disappeared into the darkness of the graveyard. Ace turned and looked at Tori, amazement plastered over her face, but Tori didn’t notice. She had fallen to her knees and started to sob. She wasn’t sure if she would ever stop again.

Murphy turned the car into the driveway, trying to ignore the chill he felt looking up at that house. It was a demon from his childhood, the local haunted house that they’d dared each other to go in, none of them actually brave enough to do it. Closest they’d ever got was the cottage by the gateway, even that terrifying them. Well, things were different now: if only some of his old friends had stayed around to see this. Kids weren’t going to be scared of the house now, no they were going to love it, the house that brought the crowds to Little Sarfield. If there were any kids left to see it, that was.

Pessimism, pessimism. It was hard not to be pessimistic when he knew what he had ahead of him. Dear Lord, let it be quick.

With careful control, Murphy eased the car to a stop just outside the

front porch. Truth be told, he did it a lot more delicately than he would have, had the car not been his: the Chief Super in the city hadn't let the village have a patrol car since one got blown up in, what, '91? Come to think of it, that was up near here too. He made sure he locked the car, checking his petrol cap was firmly secure, just in case. Slipping the keys into his pocket, he crunched up the driveway to the house.

When he got there, he was surprised to find the front door waiting open for him. Perhaps they left it open for the guests, thought Murphy as he pushed through. Into a full blown slugging match.

There were two men, one short and wiry haired, dressed in tweed, and the other tall and wrapped in a dark trench-coat. It seemed to be the little fellow who had the most to say for himself. Not that that surprised Murphy: in his experience, it was always the little fellows who came on the toughest. Probably thought they had something to prove to the giraffes. Well there'd be no-one proving anything with him here, now.

'Don't you realise what you've done?' the little fellow was saying. 'Chile is the last –'

The Sergeant coughed politely, and both men span on their heels to look at him. The look of surprise on the giraffe's face was so beautiful, it almost made the Sergeant forget why he was there in the first place. The little fellow, however, instantly recovered himself, barely a trace of surprise showing on his impish face. Like I always say, thought Murphy, it's always the little ones you have to watch.

'Sergeant Murphy,' he said, striding into the middle of the room. 'Got a call said one of you had something I ought to see.'

And without a word, the two men parted, letting Murphy look past them, to the desk. To Tommy Wiggett. Oh dear Lord, another one. He'd hoped they'd made some kind of mistake – God alone knew what kind of mistake, maybe just spotted a dead cat or something and been too afraid to go close. But now it was certain.

He took a step nearer the reception desk, trying not to look too deeply, to look at the child with a policeman's eye.

'Which one of you's the owner?' he asked, not looking at them.

'I am,' said both men together.

No prizes for guessing what they were "discussing" when I came in, thought Murphy. But he said nothing.

Again, it was the little fellow who took the lead.

'Neither of us really own it,' he said, edging towards the stairs. 'We're just caretakers.'

Murphy nodded, rested his palms on the desktop, careful not to touch the boy's body. He was staring into his closed eyes, wondering what colour they were.

'Which one of you found him?'

'I did,' said the taller man.

'I'll need to speak with you first,' Murphy said, not looking up, not thinking, barely breathing. 'The woman who made the call?'

'I'll go see how she's doing,' said the little man, and hurried away towards the back of the house.

'Don't go too far,' Murphy shouted, but his heart wasn't in it. He looked

up at the tall fellow, and plastered on his professional face, the grim look of the man who'd seen in all and waded through it all unaffected. The face so different from the one he saw in the mirror every night. 'I take it you moved the body?'

'Yes,' Giraffe said. Murphy waited for it, and it came right along: 'Wasn't I supposed to?'

Same old public. All wandering round blissfully unaware, despite all these bloody TV programmes there were trying to drum into them how the police worked. Wasn't I supposed to? Well, you'll probably have contaminated God alone knows how much forensic evidence, making my job a Hell of a lot harder, but aside from that, no you just wade on in there. But his heart wasn't really in giving him a hard time: he'd felt it himself, that urge to take the poor kids into his arms, try and squeeze life back into them. How could he blame the public for doing exactly what he wished he could?

'No,' he said, 'that's fine. I'll just need you to show me where you found him. Then I'll give his mother a call, let her know we've found him. Lord help me.'

'It'll be quite a shock.'

Murphy looked the Giraffe straight in the eyes, his jaw set.

'I've known Mary Wiggett all my life,' he said firmly. 'It'll destroy her.'

The Giraffe, to his credit, just nodded and didn't say anything else stupid.

'I'd better show you where I found him,' he said, heading to the door.

'Yes,' said Murphy, 'you'd better.'



The Giraffe – he'd have to make a note to get his real name for the report – strode over to the front door, Murphy close at his heels. So close, in fact, that he nearly tripped over him when he stopped dead, one hand of the doorknob.

'Something wrong?' Murphy asked.

'No,' he answered, too quickly. 'Yes. The door's locked.'

Murphy looked at him, from under furrowed brows. It damned well wasn't locked when he came in, and he hadn't seen anyone lock it in between times, so . . . Murphy grabbed the handle, twisted and pushed hard. The door didn't move. It was locked. The damnedest thing.

'You got a key?' he muttered to the Giraffe.

'Er, no, not really.'

'Meaning?'

'There isn't one.'

And the Giraffe turned to him, a look of dumb apology on his face.

'Only the House can lock the doors,' he said, in all seriousness. 'It looks like it doesn't want us to go outside.'

Now, thought Murphy with a sigh, this is just getting ridiculous.

At first, when the Doctor entered the kitchen, he couldn't see Rosemary anywhere. It was getting late, and the kitchen had always been gloomy at night: it was one of the things he liked about it, the half-light giving all the furniture a pale, soft-edged look. And making it impossible to spot distraught

House-nappers whilst trying to avoid police officers that you hadn't really met yet. If his life got any more complicated, he'd have to start keeping crib-notes. He might even have to start keeping his diary again. Let's hope it didn't come to that.

That was when he nearly tripped over Rosemary, huddled on a pile of blankets by the stove. She was clutching her knees, staring into the gloomy kitchen, seeing things that – well, things that the Doctor couldn't, wouldn't ever see. Her grey hair was hanging loose around her head, her mouth a thin slit, barely visible in the dark, her eyes wide and dark. Her jacket was hanging loosely from one shoulder, as if she'd got half way through taking it off when the visions hit. Now she paid it no heed, barely even acknowledging the Doctor as he crouched down beside her, placed a cool hand on her arm.

She didn't flinch, didn't move.

'What can you see?' he asked softly.

For a moment, it looked like she might not answer, like she was doomed the sit, staring like that forever, the large stove pumping its warmth into her old body forever. Then her mouth opened, slightly, and the words cracked out.

'That boy,' she whispered, 'that boy.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly, feel the warm texture of her skin in his hand, the gentle push of her pulse under his fingers. He could see the wrinkles on her skin, the fine lines marking the route to the final failure of her systems. She seemed so young. Too young to have to face up to the horror that was stalking the village, waiting to pounce. Waiting to destroy it, all but, if the future Murphy was to be believed.

‘We’ll stop what’s doing it,’ he said, hoping he sounded convincing.

‘I know what’s doing it,’ she breathed, so softly that he could barely hear her. ‘Sparrow.’

The Doctor leaned in closer, but his voice remained soft, and calm.

‘You know who’s doing this?’

‘Sparrow,’ she repeated, not looking at the Doctor. ‘He took my Sparrow. He followed me here. He won’t leave me alone.’

‘Who’s Sparrow, Rosemary?’

Delicate words, so soft they might be crushed. Rosemary turned, fixed him with a look of disbelief.

‘Sparrow. My son.’

And then the Doctor saw it, saw that particular horror that was hers alone: the Child Catcher had taken her son. He tried to think of something to say to make it better – he was the Doctor, he was meant to make things better – but nothing came, nothing came.

‘He didn’t care,’ she went on, the Doctor merely listening, not saying a word. ‘Said I was a drunk. I was a drunk. Said I didn’t deserve to have a son, said he didn’t love me like that. And then one night he took him, just snuck into his room while I was asleep – while I was drunk asleep on the floor – and took him.’

And the Doctor said:

‘Did they find a body?’

And Rosemary fixed him with that look, really saw him for the first time. She looked so confused, so lost, the Doctor wished there was something he

could do to make it better. But it was past, it had happened: all he could do was watch it. All he could do was stop it, now.

‘Why would there be a body?’

The Doctor was taken aback, floundering in sudden depths he hadn’t seen.

‘The other victims –’ he tried.

‘Why would he hurt him? He was his son. He only took him cause he was afraid. Afraid of what I’d do to him. Of my temper.’

The Doctor was lost now, searching desperately for the path back.

‘The Child Catcher was his father?’

‘*Frank* was his father. Frank wouldn’t do something like that. Couldn’t. He . . . he died.’

‘I don’t understand.’

And then the light came back into her eyes. Blinking, she washed the visions out of her sight, saw the Doctor again. She smiled weakly, wiping moisture from her eyes, wiping it on her blouse.

‘I’m sorry, it . . . it was just that boy. He reminded me of my son,’ she said, embarrassed. ‘He . . . his father took him away one night. He’s been on my mind recently. The children here – the way they just vanish from their beds. The way . . . I’m sorry.’

The Doctor nodded solemnly, his eyes bathed in shadow. His hand, still rested lightly on Rosemary’s hand, so gentle neither of them noticed it was there, perhaps.

‘I understand.’

'Do you have children?' she asked.

And somehow, the Doctor felt he owed her the truth. He couldn't chase away her demons, but he could at least give her that.

'I had a daughter,' he said quietly, his face dark, his eyes invisible.

Rosemary nodded, silent. Her hand found his, found it cool and hard.

'You know what it's like then.'

The Doctor nodded, yes, he knew what it was like. He knew what it was like. He . . .

'She died,' he said, feeling that old shift inside, that *kick* whenever he talked about her. Maybe it was the House, trying to kick the guilt back into him.

'I'm sorry.'

'So am I,' he said.

'What about her mother?' Rosemary asked, but the Doctor said nothing.

He gently pulled his hand from under hers, stood up. He was shorter than her, Rosemary knew, but in that instant he towered over her, wrapped in darkness, so indistinct she could barely see him. He looked down at her, through the night, and spoke softly:

'We should get you to bed. You need to rest.'

'I am in bed,' she said, resting her back against the stove. 'I like to feel the warm.'

'You sleep with the stove on?'

'I think Jacob lights it. It's always on when I get here. He knows I like it,

and we need the rooms for the guests.'

'Try and get some sleep,' he said, trying not to think about the guests, trying not to wonder where Rosemary, where Jacob, where both of them were, last time he was here.

Rosemary shook her head, a slight grin on her face. The Doctor looked questioningly at her, not a word said.

'I don't sleep too well any more. All this business with the Catcher,' she looked embarrassed again. 'I get dreams. Nightmares. Children disappearing. Sparrow going.'

And that was when it hit, like a lightning bolt through his spine, up into his brain. How could he be so blind? How could he not realise? Now he had seen it, it was obvious, a giant monolith on the horizon, blocking his every move: so large he had completely missed it before now. But not any more. He leaned in close to Rosemary, gently pressed a single digit to her forehead.

'No dreams tonight,' he whispered in his soft Scot's burr, 'I promise.'

And as she drifted quietly into a quiet, contented sleep, the Whirlwind spun out of the kitchen, just winding up to speed.

FIVE

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**20:17**

Chile had moved fast, showing a lack of concern for anything but his goal that only he could display. It had led him in a direct straight line between the churchyard and the House, climbing the steep wall of the valley in the pitch darkness. It held no fear for him: should he lose his footing and stumble, he had only to rise again and continue onwards. Death, he knew, had no hold over him, even if he had no real understanding of why. Not even a creature as powerful as the Caretaker could tell why Chile was spared mortality, but it didn't matter. Chile knew how the universe turned, and he knew he would be there, watching from the sidelines, when it finally spun into the pits of Hell. Even if he shoulder did hurt like buggery, burning where the bullet had pierced the skin, itching as the flesh knit itself back together.



Stupid children. Stupid naïve children. Not a blind clue how the universe worked, just wandered in armed with their “science”. Science wouldn’t help them, once the Heart was in his hands.

And it was so close. The House was towering over him now, just the thin road, the heavy woods, standing between him and it. *He* was inside, and with him, the Heart. The Emerald Heart of Kotchi the Deathless: the most powerful of all the arcane artefacts, sister-stone to the small blue Lung Egg, lost forever. The very stone that Kotchi used to keep himself alive for centuries, the lodestone he had used to divide himself thousand fold and best any army that stood against him. The great payment he had been offered by that most powerful of demons, in return for the simplest of boons.

It had seemed too good to be true, and then – a year ago, more – it had turned out it was. Despite the boon being completed, despite all the extra efforts he went to, making sure everything was perfect, the Caretaker had refused payment, sending some minor demon in a pretence of stealing it. Such a pathetic trick, but Chile had been wary of going up against the demon unprepared. But not now. Now he would have his payment, or they would see which was the most powerful: the Walker or the Caretaker.

Chile pushed on, entering the woods that bordered the House, the spindly trees seeming to part as he came through. The Caretaker’s gardens knew who the stronger was: would the demon himself be prepared to accede? Chile doubted it – he could be stubborn, even devious when he way was questioned, and he knew more tricks than the serpent: the demon had been around longer than *this* Earth, learning all the time. But then Chile had thought that about Cromwell, so far back in the past that it was hazy in his mind, and

things had turned out well enough there.

Then the trees parted again, and Chile could see it ahead of him: the squared off darkness of the foreign House he knew so well. On to claim his dues.

He strode up the gravel path, not hiding his entrance, not trying to stalk. If he was in the grounds, the House knew he was there. And if the House knew, the Caretaker would know too. There was no point in hiding. Instead he held his head high, looking at the pale brickwork, the dark windows, the dark shadow of the watch-tower rising from the slated roof, wondering what battles it had been built to warn of. Perhaps it had been built in anticipation of the battle that would happen here tonight, he thought. For some reason, he felt a chill run down his back.

Just before he reached the door, he noticed something strange. Although the front of the House was quiet and dark – as it was always, whether or not anyone was in residence – there was a bright light spilling out from somewhere to one side of the House. It seemed to be emanating from the cellar: there was, Chile knew, a small barred window that led down into the basement around that side. However, this light was no lantern or bulb: it burned a bright and furious green.

For some reason, Chile found himself thinking of the crystal green of the Heart.

No harm in checking, before the battle, he thought to himself.

Turning from the door, he paced around to the side of the building, towards the light. He never made it back to the front door.

'Tori,' whispered Ace urgently, then again: 'Tori.'

Nothing. The blond woman wrapped in the expensive clothing simply knelt on the cold muddy ground, gravestones watching her silently as the tears rolled down her face. Ace had seen plenty of tears in her life – they seemed to follow the Doctor round like children – but she couldn't remember ever seeing these before. Her face crumpled and distorted as the water fell, but she never made a sound. Not so much as a whimper, a mime of broken grief.

Ace looked around her, head whipping this way and that, wishing she had the time to let Tori bring herself out of it, knowing that she hadn't. The young woman could be like this for the rest of her life, which didn't look like being very long.

'Tori, we've got to move,' she hissed.

Tori said nothing, just wept.

Ace looked around herself again, down from the gate to the graveyard, up to the low wall at the back, picking out all the tumbled gravestones in between. Despite the darkness, despite her sunglasses, she could make out everything as clear as day. She could see the blank eyes of the fallen statue, half-masked by the overgrown grass. She could make out a fox, crouched still in the bushes, well aware there were bigger predators than him around, hoping to get out alive. As were all of them. But whatever Ace could see, she couldn't see the tell-tale sheen of the Catcher's sleek fur winding its way towards them.

She reached up with a steady hand and pulled her sunglasses from her face, folding them without looking and dropping them into her jacket pocket.

Her eyes glowed brilliant yellow as she tried to pierce the cover.

‘It’s still out there, Tori,’ she said, only half there. ‘It won’t give up the hunt that easily.’

As she stared, Ace open the corner of her mind that was Wolsey, using the Kitling’s eyes as well as her own. Despite the perfect clarity of her own vision, using Wolsey’s eyes made Ace feel like she was missing out on half the world: his eyes were so sharp they could pick out the colours of words, and see the weather shift on the other side of tomorrow. But even the Kitling, pushing silently through the undergrowth, couldn’t find a trace of the creature.

Perhaps, Ace started to think. She got no further.

‘What’s going on here?’ came an angry shout from behind her.

Spinning round, Ace caught sight of a balding little figure in a dressing gown striding up the path towards them. She recognised Father Andy immediately, and cursed to herself quietly. Now she had two of them to keep alive, as well as herself. Briefly, she found herself wondering what the Doctor was up to, why he was here to have to deal with all this. Then she set off, leaving Wolsey with his eyes on Tori, trying to intercept Andy.

‘I’ve called the police,’ he was shouting. ‘He’ll be here any second. You –’

‘Father, it’s me.’

He stopped – just what she didn’t want him to do – and looked at her with a look of confusion on his face.

‘Me who?’ he asked.

‘Me,’ said Ace, and by now she was stood beside him, tugging at his

elbow.

‘Miss McShane,’ he said, allowing himself to get pulled along by her.

‘What’s going on?’

Ace opened her mouth to answer.

Tori looked up, fresh tears on her face.

Wolsey screeched a warning, exploding out of the bushes.

With a roar like a lion, like an enraged Tyrannosaurus, muscles rippling in the pale light, claws and teeth razor slashes of white in its dark pelt, the creature burst from behind the crumbling church. Tori screamed, Andy nearly fainted, Ace called out to Wolsey, who was already trying to position himself between Tori and the creature. This is all starting to go hideously wrong, Ace realised. Perhaps she wasn’t cut out for this kind of life after all: staying in one time for twelve months had made her soft, dulled her edge.

There was a deafening thunderclap, and the creature hurled backwards through the air.

Ace looked on, amazed, and then saw Tori, still crouching down, face still wet with tears, but with her still smoking revolver held out in front of her. She looked for all the world like she was trying to use it to ward the creature away, Van Helsing with a crucifix. The creature lay on the ground where it had fallen, writhing on its back, not getting up. As Ace ran to Tori and Wolsey, Father Andy stood slack jawed, eyes wide in the dark.

‘What is that?’ he breathed, but Ace still heard him.

‘That’s your Child Catcher,’ she said, reaching Tori’s side, putting a firm hand on her arms, pushing the gun to the floor. ‘Nice shooting, Tex.’

With a sudden twist, the Catcher was back on its feet. It opened its jaws wide and howled at them, freezing their hearts in their chests. Despite her enhanced vision, Ace couldn't see any trace of a wound in the smooth black pelt.

Ace pulled Tori to her feet: she came up without a word of complaint, the gun limp in her hand. *Follow*, she told Wolsey, then turned and pulled the dead weight towards Father Andy. He stood there, his eyes afire, watching them chase towards him.

'Quickly,' Ace yelled. 'Into the church.'

And then the Catcher stopped howling, and raced after them.

They were stood by the door, Jacob wondering what to do, Murphy just about to tell him to stop messing about, when the Whirlwind spun into the room.

'I've been an idiot,' it said, coming to a brief rest in the centre of the room, its two-tone shoes seeming to rest just above the intricately woven rug on the floor. The house seemed to darken around him, storm clouds seemingly gathering around him. It was as if everything around was waiting to see what he would do next, not just the two men, but the walls, the lights, the carpets, the very fibre of the universe itself were waiting, expectant.

Even Murphy himself felt uneasy, not even sure why. But he tried to struggle on, ever professional.

'Have you got a key to this door?' he said.

The Whirlwind doffed its hat, and when it returned to its head, there was a large iron key sat in the palm of its hand. With a quick snap of the wrist, the key was sailing through the air, turning from end to end. Murphy caught it and quickly tried it in the door. Not that the Whirlwind noticed: it was already picking up speed, hurrying from one corner of the room to the other.

‘I didn’t know there was a key,’ said Jacob, petulantly.

‘Only the Caretaker knows there’s a key,’ the Whirlwind called back sharply.

‘This key doesn’t work,’ Murphy snapped, starting to feel his patience giving. ‘If you’re trying to be clever . . .’

‘I’ve not been clever,’ said the Whirlwind. ‘I’ve put this off too long, and now . . . This is all my fault.’

‘What is?’ Murphy asked, the key still held in his hand, useless.

‘This,’ he snapped, fixing Murphy with a stare so cold he felt his very soul freeze. There was fire in the Whirlwind’s eyes, but it burned like ice. ‘Death, destruction, loss, your Child Catcher. All because I’ve been too stupid to look to my own backyard.’

Despite his unease, Murphy felt himself automatically reaching for his notebook and pen. If this strange little man knew something about the Catcher, something that might solve this case some time soon . . .

‘Are you saying you know something about the missing children, sir?’

And the Whirlwind pointed an accusing finger, straight to the Giraffe.

‘Ask him,’ it said, coldly.

Jacob spluttered and shook his head as Murphy turned to him, pencil at

the ready, eyebrow raised. He looked like he wanted to beg for mercy from his accuser, but already the Whirlwind was spinning around the world, tapping first one panel on the walls, then another. Nothing seemed to satisfy, and the Whirlwind kept spinning.

‘I don’t know what you mean. I don’t know anything –’

‘You don’t know anything about it,’ said the Whirlwind sharply, spinning round onto Jacob. ‘But why not? I thought you were the Caretaker here – at least that’s what you seemed to think, and I couldn’t see any good reason to doubt you – but then it struck me.’

‘What?’ stammered Jacob.

‘Where’s your ring?’

This was fast getting away from Murphy: first they seemed to think they could solve his whole case for him, now they were bickering about jewellery. Perhaps the old stories about the house were true – perhaps it had been a mental asylum, and these two were just some long lived patients. Even as he watched, Jacob was shaking his head, not understanding (and who could blame him, thought Murphy) while the little Whirlwind pushed a ring made of some kind of Celtic knot into his face.

‘When a Caretaker and a House accept each other, there is a ceremony, bonding the two of them for the rest of their lives. The Caretaker takes a ring as a symbol of that bond,’ the Whirlwind was spitting. ‘Only you don’t wear a ring. Rosemary does.’

Jacob looked like his world was fast falling apart all around him. Murphy wanted to run up to him, give him a shoulder to lean on, at least arrest this little man for pestering the weak but likeable. Something made him stay



still, however, and keep his mouth shut.

‘I don’t understand,’ Jacob said, and the Doctor softened.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I know.’

Murphy found the courage to speak then, but couldn’t bring himself any closer to the pair of them. He stood by the door, the useless key in his hand and asked:

‘What’s all this got to do with the Catcher?’

The Whirlwind turned his attention to Murphy. Somehow, he wished he’d kept silent.

‘I know this is hard, Sergeant,’ he said, putting a hand on his: the key sat, cold and solid between them. ‘This House has chosen Rosemary, had done long before Jacob arrived. It formed a link with her, as it had with me, a long time ago. It’s my own fault: I neglected her. It’s no wonder she looked for someone else.’

That was it then, thought Murphy. The whole world was turning mad, and there was no escape from them.

‘I came back here, quite some time ago, while I was ill. It was a foolish thing to do, but I wasn’t thinking straight. By coming here, all I managed to do was pass on my illness to the House.’

Perhaps if the door didn’t work, he could break a window, get to the car somehow, escape somehow.

‘And the Rosemary came here, bringing her own nightmares with her. And the House picked up on those too, letting them bleed into its own illness,’ the Whirlwind’s eyes were dark, his lips tight. He was barely looking at Murphy

anymore. 'The creature out there – your Catcher – is the result. A creature that steals children away without a trace in the dead of night, then hunts them down like animals. The Child Catcher is part of this House, Sergeant.'

The Whirlwind was in front of him, Jacob to one side looking amazed by all he heard. It didn't look like the amazement of a man who realises he's surrounded by lunatics – the amazement no doubt showing on Murphy's face. No, Jacob was totally sold on this madness. Murphy couldn't see any way out, and he couldn't bring himself to pander to this lunacy, no matter what.

'Doctor,' he said, 'this is a house. It can't go round the village hunting and killing. It's here. Full stop.'

And the Whirlwind got that look in its eye – the look that Murphy would see in dreams for the rest of his life – and pulled Murphy's hand towards him. It opened out, revealing the big iron key in his hands. The big, solid, cold iron key.

'This House is a strange creature, Sergeant,' the Whirlwind whispered gravely. 'It's woven from the very fabric of the universe itself. Like this key, in your hand. And like that key, all it takes is the tiniest effort to change it into anything it wants to be.'

And as Murphy looked down at the cold iron in his hand, it melted and shifted, no longer a cold solid key but something else. As he looked down onto his palm, he saw a tiny velvet creature staring back up at him. He could see the muscles flexing under its skin, feel the heat of its breath against the heel of his hand, its weight on his palm, the sharp points of its razor claws pushing into his skin. He could see hatred burning in its bright yellow eyes, and heard its tiny growl as it pushed its weight onto its back legs and

launched itself into his face.

He let out a gasp, but too late. The creature was a key again, clattering to the floor. As it landed, it turned into a bright silver liquid that was quickly soaked up by the old wooden floorboards, leaving not a trace behind.

‘That’s magic,’ he breathed.

‘No,’ said the Whirlwind. ‘Mathematics.’

Murphy looked down at his hand, and saw four tiny wounds, where the creature’s claws had broken the skin. Now it was him who was going insane.

Jacob suddenly piped up, as the Whirlwind started spinning around the room again, pressing and pulling at panels apparently at random.

‘And that’s why the House has locked us in here? So we can’t go and stop the creature?’

The Whirlwind shook his head.

‘The House has locked us in here, in this room, because it knows that I’m going to stop it, and it doesn’t want to be stopped.’

‘Then how are we going to do it?’ Jacob asked.

‘Before the House came here, it was a lot bigger. I needed to change that, camouflage it so no-one would recognise her. But she still needed the same number of rooms. So I hid them, in the cellar. That’s where the House is at her most basic, her most primal. Her most vulnerable.’

‘But we can’t get to the cellar,’ said Murphy, cursing himself for getting dragged into this madness, rubbing the tiny points of blood on his hand away. ‘We’re locked in.’

And the Whirlwind stopped, and looked at him, a manic grin splitting his

face.

‘There’s more than one way to skin a House,’ he said, tapping at the wooden panel nearest his head. It opened up, revealing a long, dark passage, barely tall enough to crawl down. ‘Who’s first?’

Murphy felt his heart sink. There went his quiet night by the fire.

SIX

**Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000**

**21:48**

The Doctor led the way down the corridor holding aloft his umbrella, the tip of which was burning quite merrily to itself without ever growing faint. Murphy followed close behind, with Jacob bringing up the rear, a look of confused disbelief on his face. If what the Doctor said was true, then the long haired man was having to rapidly reappraise his position in the scheme of things. Murphy didn't envy him the task: he wasn't sure if he understood it all, let alone where everyone fitted into it. All he knew was that the little man with the grey eyes said he could stop the killings, and he was willing to give him that chance. That and the fact that he was trying as hard as he could to forget that tiny key-creature, launching itself at his face.

'Be careful,' the Doctor said over his shoulder. 'If the House really

doesn't want us to stop it, it might try all sorts of tricks.'

Murphy didn't even want to consider what that might mean. He'd seen more than enough tricks for one day.

The most impressive trick had been that stunt with the panel. He'd been the first in, the Doctor saying it was impossible to get lost in there. He found himself crawling in a dank, stone corridor that by rights should have been only a foot long, coming out into the dining room. Instead, he had crawled for five minutes, going neither up nor down, until he had suddenly fallen out onto the floor of the cellar. The Doctor had gracefully jumped down after him, saying there was no time for playing around, and rushing straight over to the far wall. At least Jacob had helped him up when he's dropped down from the ceiling.

When Murphy had looked up, there was no hole for either of them to have come through, just solid wooden roof.

'This way,' said the Doctor, taking them down another turn into another dark, wood panelled corridor. Jacob was looking around him, obviously seeing these places for the first time, but the Doctor surged ahead confidently, as if he had known each twist and turn every day of his life.

The Sergeant knew that navigating these corridors was no mean feat. When they had first left the cellar, Murphy had been having trouble getting his head around the architecture of the place. The Doctor had told him that the House stretched out for miles below the basement, but he could see how. He had grown up in the village, lived there all his life, and he knew that there was no room in the hillsides for all this. The mines alone took up most of the valley wall – empty and derelict since the eighties, but still there nonetheless. The

Doctor had simply told him to not think about it too carefully: it would only make his head hurt.

The corridors themselves were the strangest mishmash of styles that Murphy had ever seen: the first corridors they had come to from the cellar – through a door that wasn't there when he turned around to go back through it – had been hewn from living rock, flaming torches attached at regular intervals along the wall. It was into one of these that the Doctor had dipped his umbrella, telling them not to worry, it was only the mathematical representation of a fire. He assumed that the smell of plastic burning that filled the air was just the mathematical representation of the stench, too. And the mathematical representation of the burning at the back of his throat was damned realistic too.

'Be careful,' said the Doctor, pushing open another rich wood panelled door. The corridor beyond was made from neat red bricks, with a lush blue carpet on the floor. Fiercely burning gas-lamps were fixed to the walls at regular intervals, casting strange shadows.

'Just how dangerous is it here, Doctor?' Murphy asked.

The Doctor got a look on his face that Murphy didn't like: it seemed to suggest that he hadn't really considered it too much before.

'I'm hoping that she won't really want to hurt a member of the Family,' he said, almost sounding sure. 'After all, she was raised to look after us.'

'I'm not a member of your family, Doctor,' said Murphy.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'Come on, keep up.'

Great, thought Murphy, and tried to position himself so that he had the



Doctor in front of him, and Jacob behind. Just in case.

Jacob was being strangely quiet, in Murphy's opinion. He supposed it was understandable: it wasn't every day you found out your new business venture was secretly going out and killing people at the weekends. But still, he expected him to have something to say for himself. Instead, he just trudged along behind them both, his eyes flicking half-hearted up at the new surroundings. Perhaps it was shock. That could do that to a person. Better to keep an eye on him, just in case.

Perhaps noticing Murphy's attentions, Jacob chose that moment to pipe up.

'What about Rosemary?' he asked. 'Will she be alright?'

'She'll be fine,' the Doctor assured. 'She'll sleep for the rest of the night. I made sure of it.'

At least that's one less thing to worry about, thought Murphy as he hurried to keep up with the Doctor. Not that there wasn't plenty to keep them busy in the worry department as it was.

Upstairs, in the kitchen, Rosemary's eyes flicked open. She felt tired – unusual for her at that time of night – but more than that, she had the nagging feeling someone was calling her name. She looked around the kitchen, but saw nothing. Perhaps it was just a dream? Then she saw the light flooding out of the cellar door. Somehow, she knew she had to go down there.

The door opened, practically of its own accord, and she walked

carefully down, into the light.

‘Quickly,’ shouted Ace, ‘get anything.’

Father Andy nodded urgently, his dressing gown flapping around his legs to reveal neat paisley pyjamas: he had been just getting ready for bed when he’d heard Tori’s gunshots and decided to investigate. He was proving quite useful though, dragging everything from the lighter pews to the font against the doors to try and keep the creature out. Tori was proving less useful: her two fruitless attempts at shooting things, she seemed to have given up on everything and was just kneeling where Ace had left her, staring at her gun with an unreadable look on her face. Ace would worry about her later. She was busy now.

Using all her strength, Ace was upending the heavier pews and resting them up against the dusty stained glass windows. She hoped that would be enough to keep the creature out if it decided to make a concerted effort. As it was, it was pacing around the church doors, occasionally patted at them with a heavy paw, checking their strength. Ace could see it comfortably, even as she worked, through Wolsey’s eyes. The Kitling had refuse to retreat to the church with them, instead remaining outside to keep watch on their attacker. Ace had tried to convince him otherwise, but he had been adamant. Ace could still remember when she’d been like that – desperate to assert her own authority – so she hadn’t argued too strongly.

‘Do you think they’ll be strong enough?’ Father Andy asked, echoing Ace’s own fears.

‘They’ll have to be,’ she said. ‘It’s not trying to get in yet. Perhaps it’ll get bored.’

‘Perhaps,’ echoed the Father, looking down at Tori.

Ace followed his gaze. She was still sitting there, rocking backwards and forwards, staring at the gun in her hands. Ace could just make out what she was whispering to herself again and again:

‘He killed Tim. I shot him. I did.’

Ace felt sorry for her, in a way. Revenge never turned out to be as simple as it looked. And that was another problem for her to worry about, she realised: Tori was still adamant that the Doctor was to blame for her fiancé’s death. Worry about it later, Ace, you’ve got enough on your plate as it is.

‘Will she be alright?’ Father Andy asked, moving closer.

‘I don’t know,’ Ace said firmly. ‘Let’s worry about keeping that thing out there. Then we can worry about her.’

‘Of course. I’m sorry. I’m not used to this sort of thing.’

‘Happens every day where I come from, Father,’ Ace said, and for some reason Father Andy thought she was joking. ‘I think we’ve got everything covered, though.’

‘Oh no,’ said Andy, his face going pale.

‘What?’ asked Ace, feeling her heart falling.

The Father looked at her, his face limp.

‘I left the vicarage door open,’ he said.

‘Gordon Bennett! Which door.’

Father Andy pointed with an limp arm towards a door at the other side

of the vestry and Ace was already running before he dropped it again. If she was fast, she could probably barricade it before the creature even got wind of it. If she was lucky.

Wolsey was itching at the back of her head for attention. It would have to wait.

'You finish the windows,' Ace yelled over her shoulder, pulling the heavy door shut and looking for something to wedge it with.

'Okay,' said Andy. His next words were lost under the horrendous scream of two giant wooden doors being torn from their hinges.

Ace spun around, a lectern still in her hands, and watched as the two ten foot high doors splintered in on themselves, pushing all the accumulated barricade that they had managed to pile up away in one swift movement. Wolsey arrived in a flash of light at Ace's feet, all ready to protect his Sister, all angry that she had ignored his warning. She was fairly angry at herself, for that matter. She was on completely the wrong side of the room to help either Andy or Tori against the darkness battering through their fortifications as if they were paper.

'Oh God,' whispered Andy, a desperate prayer for help.

Then the doors gave way, and the darkness pounced into the room.

The Doctor turned a corner, and stopped dead. Murphy and Jacob nearly walked straight into his back, Murphy nearly singeing his hair on the man's burning umbrella. He was getting too old for this kind of messing

around: he was meant to be retiring, for Christ's sake.

'What is it?' Jacob asked, looking over the Doctor's shoulder and seeing nothing but a blank wall.

The Doctor spun around and slammed his umbrella so fast against the floor that the flames instantly went out. He was glaring around at the walls with a look that was pure murder etched onto his face. Whatever was wrong, it hadn't made him any happier.

'What is it?' the Doctor echoed. 'She's cheating, that's what it is. That's not fair!'

Murphy felt it was time he tried to reassert his authority over matters: after all, he was meant to be the policeman in the situation. No matter how weird things were, it was his job to deal with them. He stepped up, and put a firm but reassuring hand on the Doctor's shoulder. The little man simply stood and stared up at him, fire burning in his eyes.

'What exactly seems to be the trouble, sir?' he asked in his best professional drawl.

'She's changing the architectural configuration,' the Doctor answered through gritted teeth. So much for that approach then. 'She could have shifted us anywhere. It'll take us days to find where we want to be at this rate.'

'And where do we want to be?' Murphy asked.

'Wherever she doesn't want us!' the Doctor hissed at the ceiling.

Murphy was just getting into the right mood to pack it all in. Not just the job – everything. The whole reality thing. If houses could start moving themselves around the countryside, preying on innocent children, why not just

give in to all the rest of it, too? Or just tell the Chief Super exactly who his chief suspect in the case was and see how long it took them to find him a nice rubber room to bounce around.

‘She knows where I want to be. But she’s afraid of letting me get there. But she can’t keep me out forever!’

‘She’s not afraid, Doctor. She’s terrified.’

Both men turned to look at Jacob in surprise. It was the first thing he’d said for the last five minutes, practically the only sentence he’d managed to string together since they’d entered the cellar. Now he was looking at the Doctor with an intensity that Murphy could barely recognise. The Doctor looked equally confused – perhaps he wasn’t as used to seeing it as Murphy was, but the Sergeant could tell at a glance: it wasn’t just the house that was afraid of the Doctor. Jacob was growing more and more petrified by the second.

‘She’s always been terrified of you, Doctor. Didn’t you know that? Didn’t you wonder why she stopped talking to you, unless she really had to? You scare her. She knows what you are, what you do, and now she’s terrified you mean to do it to her.’

The Doctor was taken aback, genuinely amazed, Murphy could see. He stopped his ranting to the ceiling and leaned against his umbrella, his mouth falling open. He tried a couple of words before he finally managed to get a sentence out.

‘I . . . I’ve changed,’ he managed to say, and that was all for a few moments. Then: ‘I just want to help her, Jacob. She can’t go on like this.’

Jacob stared at him for a moment, eye to eye, with such an intensity

that Murphy felt like an intruder in a deeply private moment. Then Jacob nodded and the moment was broken. Without even looking, Jacob pushed against the wall behind him with a single hand, and a door hewn out of the deep red brick opened as smooth as silk. Looking through, Murphy could see only blank white walls, tinged with a pale green light.

‘In you go, then,’ he said, and motioned for the Doctor to go first.

Murphy followed after the two caretakers, finding himself walking out into a pale white room decorated at irregular intervals with dark roundels indented into the walls. The only source of light seemed to be a pale green glow coming from one side, yet the whole room seemed to glow with white. None of that was what Murphy noticed first. First he noticed the Doctor, drawn to his full height glaring to the far wall. Then he noticed the green gemstone embedded in the wall. Then he noticed the coffee-skinned man crouched down by it, one hand pushed tight against the jade facets of the gem.

‘Walker,’ the Doctor breathed.

The rat-faced man looked up at the Doctor, and Murphy retched. His eyes had no pupils in them, just blank empty whites.

‘No, Doctor,’ he said, his voice strangely booming yet feminine, ‘I am Lungbarrow.’

And the Doctor merely nodded.

Rosemary found herself wandering through corridors she had never seen before, rough stone walls with fiery torches burning on them that she

had never even guessed were below the cellar. It didn't surprise her, though, as she stepped through this impossible world: she had a picture in her head of the thousand thousand labyrinthine turns that coiled in on themselves, each hiding within the other, a multitude of rooms too large to ever fit inside the House's tiny shell. In her mind's eyes, one room glowed a pale burning green, refracting into infinity.

But even as she walked without thinking towards that room, she was paying it no attention. Her mind was full instead of another picture: a large green gemstone, roughly the size of an ostrich egg. It glittered in her mind, irresistible. And a quiet voice that she had grown to love whispered to her how important that jade egg was, how much she had to keep it, protect. Protect it with everything she had, every last thing. And she knew the voice was right, and that she should do everything it said. Why else was she there?

And without looking, Rosemary kept walking through the corridors, winding ever closer.

Ace watched as the creature bounded through the wrecked doors and stood in the bright light, its head turning this way and that. It was the first time she had seen it clearly, the first time she could see the true power buried within its hulking muscles, the smooth sheen of its velvet skin, the burning yellow of its eyes. It looked like some great black cheetah, she realised, and instantly thought of Wolsey. The Kitling was at her feet, fur on end, waiting for her first command. But it was already too late.

With a single bound, the creature launched itself towards Tori, who



simply sat on the cold stone floor and watched it come. The gun rested in her hand and never came up, as if she knew it was futile, that nothing could stop the creature now. As if she knew she was about to go the same way as her beloved fiancé, and meet him in the next world. She was a good hundred yards away, the creature less than five metres from her. It was hopeless.

The creature growled, and Tori shut her eyes. Ace was already running, Wolsey hard at her heels, but she knew there was no way she could stop what was about to happen.

'No!' screamed Father Andy, his rotund figure already moving, fast. 'Not in my Lord's house.'

He screamed at the top of his voice, swinging a mitre at the started creature, cracking it a good one across its shoulder blades before it could even react. Now if he had the good sense to run, thought Ace, they might all get out of this alive. But Father Andrew didn't look like he was going to run anywhere. He planted his feet firmly on the ground, and swung the mitre again. It cracked across the creature's nose, breaking it cleanly. Blood spurted out, and the Father let out a cry of triumph. It soon cut off as the blood instantly stopped pouring, and the nose healed itself in a second.

Why is everybody invulnerable today, thought Ace, still yards from the creature.

The creature paused, fixed Father Andy with a yellow-eyed stare.

'I . . .' said the Father.

With a single slash of its velvet paws, claws slicing clean through the air, slipping passed the molecules themselves, Father Andrew was cut down. Four thin trails of blood burst out onto his vestments, deep crimson welling up

from far too deep inside him. He looked down at his chest in surprise, still a full second away from the pain of it. Then the creature swiped again, and broke his neck clean through.

As he landed awkwardly against the wall, Ace was already screaming. And still Tori did not move.

The creature turned lazily, cast a burning eye across the room. It saw Tori, helpless on the floor, and saw Ace sliding to a halt, panting to herself, her face a mask of rage. Her eyes matched the eyes of the tiny hissing creature at her feet, all tooth and claw. Her teeth were at once too big for her mouth, razor canines bursting out. Her whole body shook as the adrenaline poured through her veins. She fixed the creature with her fiercest look, and spat:

'If you don't kill me first, I'll rip you in half before you get a step towards her.'

And the creature seemed to nod, just for a second, before Ace launched herself hissing into its velvet embrace.

The Doctor dropped his umbrella, took his hat from his head, and advanced on the coffee-skinned man with both hands outstretched. Jacob stood, guarding the door, whilst Murphy tried to work out where he would be best to stand. He knew he was in over his head here – if he wasn't careful, he'd drown. The best he could do was keep away from the action, and do what he was told. Which was nothing. No-one had spoken to him since the secret passage had opened up in front of them.

‘You’re not well,’ the Doctor told the man – Lungbarrow? ‘I want to help.’

‘I am not well,’ the man echoed, his voice lilting disturbingly. ‘You want to help.’

The Doctor kept his hands visible while taking a quick glance at the glowing jewel embedded in the wall. The man was still clutching it with his right hand, so tightly that the knuckles were turning bone white. The green light was glowing through his hand, making the skin seem a sickly septic colour. He didn’t seem to notice.

‘So that’s what it is,’ the Doctor said, knowingly.

‘What?’ Jacob asked, genuinely intrigued. So this Lungbarrow fellow wasn’t telling him everything, then. Interesting.

The Doctor didn’t take his eyes from the man blank white eyes, but pointed to the glowing stone with a quick gesture.

‘The Emerald Heart of Kotchi the Deathless,’ he said gravely. ‘Very useful for sustaining part of your body matter entirely separate from the rest of you. That’s what’s keeping the Catcher separate from you, isn’t it.’

‘That’s what’s keeping the Catcher separate from me,’ the man echoed again. What was he, simple?

‘That’s good,’ the Doctor said, sounding as if he meant it. ‘You’re keeping the Cheetah Virus in the Catcher, aren’t you. That’s why you needed to create it, to keep the virus from infecting the rest of you. So all you need to do is let me take the emerald, and you’ll be free of the virus.’

The Doctor reached for the gemstone, keeping his eyes on the dark

clothed man, but Lungbarrow was too quick for him. His grip on the stone tightened, his free hand pushing the Doctor away again. The little man went sprawling straight onto his back on the floor – the coffee-skinned fellow must be stronger than he looked, another thing to bear in mind before diving in. The Doctor was looking up at the big fellow, a look of disbelief on his face.

‘No,’ boomed the big man, his hand still clutching at the jewel.

‘I don’t understand,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘Don’t you want to be cured.’

‘No,’ he repeated.

‘Then what?’ asked the Doctor.

‘She doesn’t want to be cured, Doctor,’ said Jacob softly, from behind them, ‘because then you’ll go away again, problem solved.’

‘I don’t . . .’ began the Doctor, and was interrupted.

‘I remember,’ said the giant. ‘I remember the Family. I remember being happy. I remember having Cousins to love, to nurture, to protect. I remember . . . I remember them loving, nurturing, protecting me. I . . . Where did it go? Why did you take them from me? Why did you take me from them?’

And for the first time since Murphy had met him, the Doctor was silent, unsure what to say. Tears were rolling down the dark man’s face, his features distorted with emotion. It made Murphy want to reach out, tell him it would be okay. Christ alone knew what it was doing to the Doctor.

‘She’s lonely, Doctor. That’s why she wanted me to open her up to the guests,’ Jacob intoned quietly. Everybody was listening, careful not to miss a word. ‘But that’s not enough. She just wants to go home. We both do.’

‘I want my mountain,’ sobbed the man. ‘My deep sweet roots.’

‘Neither of us belong here. Neither do you, Doctor.’

The Doctor was on his knees now, looking up at the dark figure clutching the jewel.

‘You did all this, just to get me here,’ he said. Neither of them answered him. ‘What are you planning?’

And Jacob reached into his pocket, pulled out a small glass globe. Murphy strained to see, but from what he could make out it looked like a small snow-scene, the kind you could buy from any tourists shop. As Jacob swung it through the air, snow began to fly in the water inside the globe. It fell gently on a perfect replica of the guest house. Jacob tossed the snow-scene through the air, and the Doctor caught it without looking.

He stared at it, sitting in his hands, said nothing.

‘Take me home,’ said the dark man.

And that was when Murphy worked up the courage to speak.

‘What’s going on, Doctor?’ he said.

‘This House doesn’t belong here,’ he said quietly. ‘This globe will link it to my TARDIS – my transport – and I can move it anywhere I want. Just like I did the last time.’

Sometimes, thought Murphy, it just wasn’t worth the effort.

‘Take me home.’

‘Take us home.’

Ace rolled, forcing the weight of the creature under her, and bit hard.

She felt the skin give, the strange blood spurt into her mouth, and had to admit – just to herself – that it felt good. Then she felt the wound heal instantly, and spat the blood out in disgust. There was nothing she could do: even if she kept in close to the creature, even if she fought to stop it ripping her and Tori to shreds, there wasn't a thing she could do to hurt it. Eventually, she would tire, and that would be that.

Wolsey wasn't having much luck either, hissing and spitting on the creature's face, his claws extending to keep him firmly attached. The creature was tossing and turning its head to try and dislodge the Kitling, but to no avail. Even the rolls it kept throwing itself into, trying to shake off Ace, only made her cling on tighter. There was nothing else she could do, save let go and die.

Briefly, she hoped the Doctor was having better luck. Then she bit again with her sharpened canines, and dug in tight as the creature rolled again.

'Take us home,' Jacob repeated.

It look like again he would get no answer, the Doctor still staring into the snow-scene. Then he drew himself up to his full height, turned on Jacob and said a single word. It echoed in the confined space, Murphy hearing it more than once he could swear:

'No.'

The tall man in the dark clothes let fresh tears fall from his face, slumped to the floor with a wail, his hand still clutching the glowing jewel.

Murphy watched Jacob's face set hard, his shoulders seeming to broaden as he towered over the Doctor.

'Then I'll have to make you,' he said, taking a step forward.

For no reason he could understand, Murphy threw himself in between the Doctor and Jacob, sizing up to the long haired man, his eyes barely level with his chest. The taller man looked down at him, almost pitifully, and reached out with a slab-like hand. Murphy knew there was nothing he could do, but he had to at least try to do his duty. It was what they paid him for.

'No,' screamed the Doctor, and Jacob froze. 'No more.'

The little man pushed himself in between Jacob and Murphy, and despite being shorter than Murphy, somehow he managed to hold his own against his cousin. His grey eyes were burning with a darkness that sent a chill down Murphy's spine. He briefly considered holding back the Doctor, afraid of the damage he could do, but something stopped him. Somehow, he got the feeling this little man was a much better judge of what was right and wrong than he could ever be.

'She hasn't told you everything, has she, Jacob,' the Doctor growled darkly.

'No, don't listen,' the man said from the floor.

'What do you mean?' Jacob asked, unsure.

'Has she told you where the other Cousins are? Has she told you why I brought her here in the first place? Why I leave her here, even though I know what it does to her, even though I know she was grown to be full? Why don't you ask her?'

‘Don’t listen. Take me home.’

‘Ask her.’

Jacob took a tentative step towards the dark mass of tears on the floor.

‘What does he mean?’

But the coffee-skinned man was in no condition to answer. He was a heap on the floor – his hand still clutching the gem, but the rest of him destroyed. Tears flowed from his eyes, and the only sound he made was a deep, heart-breaking sob.

‘I want my Family back,’ he finally managed to cry.

And then the Doctor stepped forward, and put an arm around the man, comforting, soothing, understanding.

‘I know, I know.’

‘What happened?’ breathed Jacob, eyes to the broken creature on the floor.

The Doctor sighed, his eyes hiding themselves in shadows, looking back. Further than he cared to, for the sake of his soul.

‘There is a secret that only the House knows in our Family, for her own protection,’ intoned the Doctor, the air chilling around his every word. ‘But someone found it out. There . . .’

He paused. No-one spoke.

‘The High Council decreed that the Loom should be shut down, pending an investigation – some other matter, but perhaps that’s how they found out: investigating the Loom.’

A sigh, a shiver, the images in his head, his alone.



‘The Cousins started to vanish, one by one. There was no Loom to make replacements, no-one could be entirely sure they had died. They just vanished. Soon there were only a few of us left, then only the two of us. That was when the House told me the secret, and I knew what I had to do.’

Silence, silence, even the man silenced. He started to draw himself up, the tears drying on his cheeks.

‘Gallifrey wasn’t safe any more. I . . . I made arrangements to leave, take the House with me, hide her somewhere, somewhere no-one would ever look. And then I had to abandon her, so that even if they found me, they wouldn’t find her.’

‘Alone,’ the man said, standing tall now. ‘Alone.’

‘I didn’t know,’ said Jacob, almost to himself.

‘This can’t go on any more,’ said the Doctor. ‘You know you can’t go home. You know what that stone is doing to you. Let it end now.’

And the tall, dark-skinned man looked down at the Doctor, towering over him, looking for all the world like he might pound him to the floor. Then, slowly, he nodded, and turned away. Reaching out with his other hand, the tall man grasped the glowing gem firmly in both hands. With a gentle pull, he pulled it clean away from the wall.

The creature suddenly jerked beneath her, kicking out with its back legs so that Ace found herself flying through the air. She landed hard, pulling herself to her feet again, and saw the beast shaking its head by the ruined

doors, by Father Andy's body, by Tori, still sitting blank faced on the floor. Wolsey was still clutching at its back, his claws ripping the soft velvet pelt to shreds. But as Ace watched, she suddenly realised that the skin wasn't knitting back together. The creature wasn't invulnerable any more.

With a cry, she dived back into the fight.

Rosemary stood by the door, heard the voices but didn't understand what they meant. Then the voice in her head went silent too, that quiet, insistent voice telling her about the beauty of the gemstone. But she suddenly realised that that didn't matter any more: glancing through the door, she could see the pale green fire of the gem itself. It was more beautiful than anything she had ever seen before, even her little Sparrow who she would have died for. She didn't need the voice to tell her about its greatness anymore: she could see it for herself.

Then she saw the tall dark man reach out with both hands and pluck the stone from the House's grasp. She felt a memory shift in her head, a memory that wasn't hers, that came from the soft wooden ring she wore on her finger. The same tall dark man, come to steal the gemstone from them, demanding it, having to be tricked out of it. Now he had come to steal it back again.

Rosemary knew – absolutely knew – that she couldn't let that happen. Screaming like a harpy, she burst into the room and launched herself at the stone, legs flying as she sailed through the air. She reached with her fingers and snatched the stone from the thief's grasp, as Jacob, the Doctor, that

policeman, all looked on in dumb silence. She felt triumph flood through her as the floor sailed up to meet her, her arms still outstretched.

'No!' screamed the Doctor, trying to intercept, but it was too late.

The jewel hit the floor first, cracking right down its middle like an over-ripe egg. All the green fire held within, every inch of power that had ever coursed through its fragile body, all was released in one fiery burst. The flames surrounded Rosemary, infused her body with more life than she had ever felt, making her feel young again, just for a few brief moments. Then her body started to rebel, fight against it, vibrate with disharmonics until she could feel it in her teeth.

Whilst the Doctor, Jacob, Murphy stood by and watched, Rosemary laughed as the jewel cracked, and her body crumbled away to dust.

With a final massive push, Ace managed to fling the creature across the room, into the remaining pews which went down like a pile of dominoes. She was on her feet again in a second, Wolsey panting by her side, but she already knew there was no need. She had heard the crack as the beast landed badly against the wooden seats. She knew what it meant. She'd heard spines snapping before. She could see it bent awkwardly, trying to pull itself up one more time, for one last attack. To no avail.

Then, with a final shriek that shattered every window in the church, sending shards of glass flying in every direction, the creature exploded into a shower of green sparks.

When the firework display was over, and the glass had settled, Ace crunched her way across the stone floor towards Tori. The young woman was still crouched there, not saying a word, rocking slightly. Two bloody tears were slowly rolling down her cheeks, from where the glass had landed near her eyes. Another inch or two and she would have been blinded. Ace hoped that she'd recover herself enough to realise how lucky she was.

Sitting down next to the woman, Ace wrapped her arms around her, tried to force away the urge to continue the hunt that was welling up inside her, and waited for the cavalry to arrive.

## EPILOGUE

**Little Sarfield: 18. March, 2000**

**13:15**

The Doctor stood with his back against the church, feeling the roughness of the brick despite his thick coat, feeling the cold bite in his bones. He was holding his umbrella up to his lips, as if it could somehow breathe the life back into him, his eyes tired, and dark. He watched in silence as two men from the village struggled with a pulley system, tied to one of the fallen stones in the graveyard. Slowly, as if reluctant to release its grip on her, the green grass finally parted around the statue, and the stone angel lifted into flight once more.

The Doctor looked at her, hanging there, impassive, and his thoughts were his own alone.

He was still trying to work out whether things had turned out right or

not. The House was settling back down again, Jacob skulking through its rooms, a constant look of unease on his face. The Catcher's reign had ended – thanks to Ace – and now the village could sleep in peace. But most of them wouldn't: two families had moved in the last couple of days, and they were just the first. Sarfield was awash with cardboard boxes and mover's vans, the very life drained out of the place. It would be a hard three years, and what had they got to look forward to then?

The Doctor cast a dark glance up at the manor house, glaring down at him from opposite the House. He tried not to think about it, to resist the urge to pre-empt himself.

There were too many loose threads left dangling now, too much unresolved for him to feel good about himself. Murphy was trying to comfort Mrs Wiggett, help with the arrangements for her son's funeral. He had promised to stay for that, before he made his move again. Ace had taken the opportunity to visit Tori in the hospital: she was getting better, they said, but she might never come back to what she was before. Before she got dragged into the Whirlwind's path, watched her life torn from around her for reasons she couldn't even comprehend. Another casualty with his fingerprints all over them.

Ace herself was shaken, too, he could tell. She had pushed further into the virus' control than she had been before, had had to just to protect herself from the creature. The creature he'd brought to the village. She had calmed herself, eventually, sliding into that grey half-life somewhere between human and hunter, but it still worried her. Not the transformation, he guessed, but how pleasing it had been to join the hunt, for just a few moments. He had

been there himself, he had tasted the blood on the wind. He knew how strong the call was.

Hard times ahead, hard times behind. And then . . . ?

As he watched, the stone angel hovered in the air, her stone wings seeming to flap over her podium, almost disturbing the grass with their wind. The two men struggled as they tied her secure, leaving her broken feet just inches away from the stone of her base. Once she was secure, they set about fixing her back to her platform – for the first time in a hundred years – using a thick paste of concrete and rubble. Her cold stone eyes seemed to stare down at him, unblinking, unmoved. Just for a moment, he saw another pair of eyes, dark and round, full of love, and had to turn away.

‘I wondered where you’d got to,’ said Jacob.

The Doctor didn’t move, still kissing his umbrella, still frowning. He wasn’t surprised: he’d known exactly where Jacob was, exactly how long he’d been there. After all, he was Family.

‘I had to make sure they treated her gently.’

Jacob nodded softly, looking across the churchyard at the grave.

‘Who was she?’

‘She was Susan, my granddaughter,’ the Doctor looked up at Jacob, his face unreadable. ‘She was the first child to be born on Gallifrey in . . . in longer than anyone can really say.’

‘I don’t understand.’

The Doctor sighed, his eyes on the grave in front of him, his mind on the graves behind him. But he couldn’t remain silent. Jacob was Family – he



deserved to know what he was.

‘Back before the House left Gallifrey,’ he began, then paused. ‘Before that. Back before I was woven, there was a Cousin of Lungbarrow. Cousin Mulciber, one of the greatest geneticists our downtrodden Loom had ever produced. He could have done anything, had he set his mind to it, anything at all. But he was obsessed by one thing: our sterility.’

Jacob was silent. The angel’s grey eyes watched over them both, her children, her charge. All was silence.

‘He started work, using the Loom to splice Gallifreyan genes with those of a relatively unheard of species, from some backwater of the time-lines. Every time a Cousin died, his replacement was woven less and less pureblood, one step closer to Mulciber’s dream: a fertile Time Lord.’

‘It would have taken centuries,’ interjected Jacob.

The Doctor nodded.

‘Patience was never something our kind lacked. Except for me.’

‘What happened?’

‘Things progressed well. The first hybrid Cousin was woven, and though he was still sterile he showed promise. His genes were re-spliced, re-cut, and fed back into the Loom. When, three centuries later, another replacement was woven, she was so close – genetically speaking – to the first that she couldn’t be called his Cousin. She was his daughter, Ash. And she was fertile.’

Overhead, storm clouds were rolling. Neither of them noticed, all eyes on the workmen, the angel, the grave.

‘Mulciber got really excited about that, eager to move on to the next stage of his work. He used a subject from that tiny backwater planet, and he used Ash, and eventually she fell pregnant.’

The angel stood and watched, her hands spread in forgiveness, but her face cold and blank.

‘There was no way he could hide a pregnant woman on a sterile planet, so he kept her confined in the House. He thought he could trust his Cousins not to betray him. He was wrong. One of the Cousins worked for the CIA. He thought it was his duty to report him, and Mulciber was taken into custody, Ash with him.’

The Doctor turned and looked at Jacob, a single tear in his cold grey eyes.

‘There hadn’t been a child born on Gallifrey in millennia. They had no idea what to do. There . . . there were complications. The child was saved, but the mother . . .’

The clouds broke overhead, and a soft gentle rain began to fall. Neither of the Time Lords noticed, both looking at each other. The rain struck the statue’s cold face, sending a single tear trickling down her stone cheek.

‘The High Council ordered that the Loom be shut down, while they tried to decide what to do. Centuries of indecision, probably, but it was taken out of their hands. The Cousins started vanishing. Never replaced, never found. The Cousin who had betrayed Mulciber, he realised what was happening, saw it too late. All he could do was use his position, his limited power, to free Ash’s child – to free Susan, his granddaughter – and take her where they could never find her. Out into the universe.’

And then Jacob saw it.

‘You?’

‘I thought I was doing what was best. I was wrong.’

‘But you’re not a pure Gallifreyan?’

‘None of us are, Jacob. The Loom was never reprogrammed, just closed down.’

A pause. The words hit Jacob, leaving him winded. The two men stood in silence, watching as the angel was secured, standing over them, wings outstretched, as if showing them the way to escape. Fly above it all, she told them, fly away.

‘Is that the big secret?’

The Doctor shook his head solemnly, said nothing. The implication was clear: don’t ask, and you’ll be happier.

‘How did Susan die?’ Jacob asked eventually.

‘She hasn’t, not yet,’ said the Doctor, and then when he saw Jacob’s confused look, he added: ‘We made an agreement, when we were travelling together. When we died – however we died – we would come back to the House to be buried, back to when the House first came here. That way, whenever we arrived on Earth, we could always visit each other, to pay our respects. If you look closely enough, you’ll see my name on that headstone, too.’

Jacob felt a chill.

‘How?’

‘I’ve made arrangements with an old acquaintance. He’ll outlive us

both, and he's been paid well.'

'Chile.'

The Doctor nodded.

'Part of our original deal. I brought the House to Earth, and he found somewhere to hide it, and took care of our arrangements when the time came.'

'Only he was somewhat over-zealous when it came to keeping it secret,' Jacob said, realising suddenly. 'All those villagers.'

'I didn't know he'd done it until it was too late,' was all the Doctor could say.

'And you trust him with the House?'

The Doctor looked up at the House, through the rain.

'The House chose him. I think it saw an echo of its own loneliness in him: he's lived longer than his kind can, and it's made him wary of other humans. I think the whole experience has changed him,' he sighed then, turning on Jacob. 'I think things will turn out for the best with him. No, all that we really have to worry about is you.'

And Jacob felt a chill again, having those slate grey eyes resting on him. He looked to the floor, and prayed to whatever gods he knew that he was doing the right thing.

'I can't stay in the House. I know she needs someone, but I . . . ' he looked sheepish. 'I can't stay there.'

The Doctor nodded solemnly, his lips to his umbrella again. Then he smiled broadly, and the clouds lifted.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I think I’ve got the perfect idea.’

And, alone again in the graveyard, the angel watched the little man lead the taller away, into the village. If her stone face could have smiled, be sure it would have.